Lost in Translation: Photo-installations by Chris Barry

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This year a retrospective exhibition of Chris Barry's work titled *Lost in Translation* went on tour in three European capitals – London, Warsaw and Budapest – while her most recent work, *Habitat*, was exhibited at the Victorian Centre for Photography (Centre for Contemporary Photography) in her hometown of Melbourne. Next year Barry will become artist-in-residence at the Araluen Arts Centre in Alice Springs, following receipt of the Alice Prize in 1991. Since her graduation from the Photography Studies College in 1985, this Melbourne photographic artist's work has been exhibited regularly in private and state galleries, in group and solo exhibitions, and is now represented in all major national collections of photography.

This work, however, has received little critical attention. Barry's first solo exhibition (*Displaced Objects* held at Artists Space Gallery in 1986) was not reviewed in *The Age* or *Photofile*. Her second solo exhibition (*Displaced Objects 2* and later renamed *Lost in Translation* at Artists Space Gallery, 1988) was summarily dismissed by an unsympathetic male critic standing in for the regular *Age* photography reviewer, Beatrice Faust. This stand-in (who seems nostalgic for the Good Old Days when women knew their place, which was on their backs, as suitable subjects for the Great Male Gaze) has now become the regular reviewer for *The Age*. Barry (along with other women photographers) has fared no better since. Apart from a necessarily brief paragraph in a survey article by Helen Grace on Australian photography in the 1980s for the special Bicentennial issue of *Art and Australia*, the critics generally have ignored her.

How to explain this neglect? Isn't her work considered interesting? Or are the spaces for photography criticism and analysis in this country just too limited?

I think there is some truth in both these explanations. Her work was not considered interesting because it couldn't be framed by dominant critical perspectives. It was neither cool enough or hot enough for *Art & Text* or *Photofile* in the 1980s, with no tit-tease (as in Brown-Rrap), no prick-tease (as in Davila), no slap-and-tickle, and not even a wink at the classics (as in Ferran, Zahalka and Henson). The cool of her work was modernist rather than postmodernist, and the heat of the work was generated by a melodramatic, rather than a pornographic imagination.

Anglo-Saxon Australian culture – in particular that of middle class intellectuals – is more uncomfortable with the melodramatic than with the pornographic. It can cope with naked bodies but it can't cope with naked emotions. Maybe that's why it categorises certain types of art as 'ethnic' or 'women's': to keep 'them' at a remove from 'us'. It isn't cool to acknowledge strong emotions in ourselves and yet it isn't progressive to disallow strong emotions in others (especially members of oppressed minorities or classes). In the 1980s, enough of the social consciousness of the 1970s survived for even the coolest of critics to fear being labelled racist, sexist or classist.

The melodramatic in Barry manifested itself in her manipulations of materials. The devices she used spoke of pain, fragmentation, enclosure. The portraits themselves, unlike those of other 'ethnic' photographers, were *not* inherently melodramatic. They did not have the haunted eyes of victims nor the defiant posture of resistance.

In Barry's works from the 1980s, there were three melodramatic scenarios: the displaced migrant family melodrama; the Polish nation's melodrama; and the melodrama of class oppression. These three scenarios would cross and intersect. The displaced nuclear family carried with it a national history of loss, dislocation and oppression. The migrant family are also workers, trapped in factories and offices. The extended family in Poland (the subject of the second solo exhibition) are victims of national and class oppression. The works weep and bleed, are rent and torn. The portraits are framed, often literally by a picture frame or wire grid, more often by a border collage, or sometimes by both. The jagged edges of broken

glass placed over the portraits or collage of family memorabilia (old postcards, letters, family photographs), the red drops of paint spattered over the final assemblage, cry with pain.

The work of the second solo exhibition, produced following an extended visit to Poland, employed repetition and variations on two major themes: the portrait and the landscape. Single portraits of Polish relatives were posed against a decorative wallpaper background or a government housing block; the urban landscapes were littered with rubble, neon signs and billboards advertising dance halls or movies. This work was sparser than the earlier collages, the subjects less tampered. Colour assumed a new kind of prominence: the black and white portraits were endowed with brightly coloured floral dress or floral setting. Instead of the emphatic framing devices that figured prominently in the earlier work, the subjects now were less conspicuously and more gently framed by paper borders, rather than picture mounts. The collage was masked, rather than highlighted: the marks of construction tended to reside in the clear demarcation between black and white photograph and the addition of strongly coloured paint. For example, two unsmiling portraits of Polish peasant women (aunts or grandmothers?) were marked by dramatic deployment of colour contrast. Brightly coloured clusters of flowers and foliage, in clothing or backdrop, bloomed incongruously alongside the dun-coloured sepia, or grey tones of the subject. This drew attention to the formal construction of the photograph, but also commented, metaphorically, on Poland; the beauty and colour of the natural scenery, the countryside and the folk handicrafts formed a sharp contrast to the bleak conditions of social existence.

The work of Australian women photographers that did receive critical attention in the 1980s was worked around the concept of the simulacrum. The re-staging of scenarios from the art historical canon, with playful post-feminist permutations, marks the work of Anne Zahalka, Anne Ferran, Julie Brown-Rrap and Janina Green. In their work one finds to varying degrees the seductive power of the Great Masters, whose compositions are simulated with subtle variations in ways that draw attention to the problematic use of woman's body as artist's model or the co-option of classical conventions of art by photography. But they nevertheless bear signs of the desire to enter the Temple of Art: a certain aestheticism, a classical sense of proportion and restraint, a painterly use of colour if not the actual use of coloured paint. Brown-Rrap alone tends to fracture and distort the image. One feels, in her work, that the constraining hand of the artist on the model is a violation of the body of woman; as theft with violence. In most other cases there is an air of civilized restraint, of good taste, of deference to the art historical canon—albeit combined with a light touch of irony.

Like Brown-Rrap, Chris Barry in her early work fractured the image and employed collage, but she was not interested in the relation between artists and models, or the complicity of photography with classical art practice. In her case the fragmentation referred to social experience outside the world of art history, and the media she referred to were not the high art media of painting and sculpture but the mass media of billboards, magazine pictures, postcards, newspaper advertisements, family snapshots and movie posters. But her work too, despite the social referents and the acute fragmentation (especially marked in the first exhibition) carried signs of the desire to be located as art. Not the playful second-degree art of the *Art &Text* stable of artists, but a deadly serious kind of expressive art.

What was being expressed? Some of the 1980s work, the second exhibition in particular, spoke specifically of the sorrow and pity of Poland and Poles in exile, or expressed sympathy with the Solidarity movement. But it predominantly expressed the sense of dislocation and fragmentation experienced by second-generation Australians, those born in Australia of migrant parents, who grow up in a family and/or community with ties of blood and sentiment to another country, another heritage, other memories, icons, costumes.

Apart from Kooris, all Australians have had this experience. In earlier times, Australian children used to be dressed up in tartan kilts and taught to perform Scottish highland dances in schools named by Scottish migrants with Scottish names. Later generations of migrants dressed their children up in Greek and Polish national costumes to perform horas and mazurkas on festive occasions. Not only do they dress in exotic costumes, they also imbibe a second history, not always taught at school, of another faraway land, in which grandparents, uncles and aunts still reside. In the family album and the framed photographs on the

mantelpiece, photography functions to maintain nostalgia for this other place, for the unruptured extended family, and helps maintain the process of mourning that loss.

Some of Barry's most powerful work incorporates fragments of the family photograph album, as well as other specific symbols of memory and loss – like the red poppies of remembrance, which, for exiled Poles, are associated with the sacrifice of Polish lives at the Battle of Monte Casino in World War II. A history of bloodshed and scarring is evoked by the red specks of paint spattered like blood over her collages and the black char-scarring of portraits. Rubble – of industrial wasteland, of bombed cities, of broken and destroyed lives – litters all her work.

Barry herself is not an exile but the daughter of exiles. Like many other young Australians, she is the child of parents who, uprooted by the violent dislocations and disturbances affected by Nazism and Stalinism during and after World War II, exchanged the privations and oppressions of life in eastern Europe for those in the industrial suburbs of Australian cities. Her early work speaks of their experience of exile: the nostalgic longing for the lost homeland and the ruptured extended family; the nostalgia for nature in the midst of the modern metropolis; the nostalgia for rural simplicity and community in the industrial wasteland of a Melbourne or Warsaw. As a member of the second generation, born in Australia, the young Krystyna Marczak acquired the languages – not just English but also the languages of photography, collage and re-photography – to interpret that condition for a wider audience and also to set it at a certain critical distance.

In the exhibition *Habitat*, her most recent work, a decisive shift was evident. There were no people in evidence, only discarded industrial debris and collapsing, decaying buildings under a glowering polluted sky. A vast panel made up of numerous contact print-size images, was revealed, on closer examination as a set of multiplied versions of two single shots (one of natural scenery, one of high-rise buildings) which had been treated in varying ways (underexposed, overexposed, superimposed, placed right side up, upside down and back-to-front; printed from negatives and positives). The overall impact of this intricately constructed patchwork was of a blurring and bleeding together of the world of nature and the man-made world; the suggestion that in our chaotic, contaminated world, the dichotomous subjects are almost inter-changeable or indistinguishable from each other.

It would seem that Chris Barry's melodramatic imagination is still at work but that the focus has shifted from a particular experience of dislocation and loss to a more generalised mood of urban malaise. The buildings and the landscapes are not geographically or culturally specific. The intricacy and sophistication of the formal design, the technical skills are as impressive as ever, but the work lacks the personal edge, the particular intensity and poignancy of the earlier installations, seeming to indulge in a currently fashionable aesthetic.

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