







Ordinary Escapes and Other Magic
Celeste Aldahn & Ray Harris

SASA GALLERY
2 April - 10 May 2013

Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered

It is an odd undertaking, dangerous and useless, but it is never any good arguing with women who appeal to sentiment and not to reason, who are guided by the one and let down by the other.¹

La Luna

Celeste Aldahn, in collaboration with Ray Harris, the two artists in this exhibition created a short moving image piece, *Waxing and Waning*, 2012 seen in Melbourne and Launceston and featured on the invitation to this exhibition, in which the pale incandescent oval of a woman's face, illuminated by series of different coloured gels of theatrical lighting rises and sinks out of a pool of dense opaque water. The face slowly rises and submerges, gaining clarity, form, and comes into full light then blurs and disappears on a repeating cycle. This subtle yet continuous movement, the loop of appearance and disappearance is an apt and immediately recognisable metaphor for the waxing and waning of the moon, whose periodicity and changes are particularly legible due to the dramatic changes of profile and have been the stuff of legends in myriads of cultural traditions and mythologies. That we can read the inky darkness of the water as the night sky, to the naked eye fixed, impenetrable as a domed roof and yet also, as we know through scientific research, reaching out to vast distances is indicated by the presence of glittering stars. They suggest that what we see in *Waxing and Waning* is a night sky with moon and stars. Whilst some stars such as the Federation Star on the Australian flag, the stars on the United States flag may indicate the nation or other stars may indicate rank when on the collar or shoulder boards of a military uniform or the dressing room door, these cheap floating stars are distinctly more louche. These stars are fake sparkly glittery stars such one may scatter on a table cloth around the plates of food at a birthday party, such as can be embroidered onto an evening dress or a performance costume, glued on a diary, school project workbook or phone cover, applied to a face as a dramatic maquillage and decoupage onto walls and furniture. They have multiple and interconnected meanings, often indicating the presence of the feminine, including the supernatural, fairies, witches and magic, again an inconsistent realm such as that of the night and the moon and women too. The substitution of face and moon recalls the myriads of allegorical images of women as moon, stars and night. In Australia the plein air painter and associate of the Heidelberg School, Artur Loureiro, painted in 1888 both the *Spirit of the New Moon*, a half dressed girl seated on a crescent moon and the *Southern Cross*,² a girl in dark chiffon seated on a cloud with the constellation around her. These images were expressive of the rising Australian nationalist sentiments but also married an Australian theme with a more Eurocentric tradition of iconography. The realm of water and fluids is unstable, variable and is often linked to the female, particularly the female body that is culturally often read as soiled, leaking and abject in opposition to the male body contained, ordered and hard and ever reliable.

Reason, the Enlightenment and modernism have often defaulted to male as the norm, resolute and authoritative against the fantasy, fictions, artifice of the ever changing female.

Moonstruck

In the popular imagination the moon has been a catalyst of madness. The words lunatic and lunacy contains the Latin word for moon. Classical philosophers Aristotle and Pliny the Elder argued that the full moon induced insanity in susceptible individuals, believing that the brain, which is mostly water, must be affected by the moon and its power over the tides, but recent research claims that the effect of the moon's gravity is too slight to make an impact. Popular belief even today insists that admissions to psychiatric hospitals, traffic accidents, homicides or suicides increase during a full moon, although scientists vehemently debate such concepts. In these melées of claim and counter claims, experts and the general public line-up on different platforms. Factoids, fantasies and urban myths steadfastly refuse to die, even under the weight of hard statistics and experimentally proven data. Moonmadness abounds in myths and tales and artworks that continue to narrate and perform these stories. The werewolf is traditionally awakened by the full moon. In the ballet *Giselle*, the ghosts of unmarried girls, who died unhappy in love, dance unsatisfactory men to death in the moonlight. In the 1990s cult film *Bram Stoker's Dracula*³ Lucy Westenra goes out into the moonlit night to meet Dracula, as the vampire is allergic to daylight, leading to herself becoming a vampire. The unstable links the moon and women, who in the nineteenth and early twentieth century western cultures, unless strictly conforming and controlled under male guidance, were seen as either diseased or heading for a state of unwellness, both physical and mental. Women with creative and intellectual ambitions were often assumed to be suffering symptoms of madness, or be in danger of straining body and mind to such a degree that insanity would be the inevitable outcome. This tight nexus of woman/madness/(faux) creativity persisted beyond the Victorian era. The language and concepts driving clinical treatment of the mentally ill were highly influential as a cultural vocabulary throughout the modernist era. The new theories of psychoanalysis themselves became a sign of the modern and related to the sense of ordering, cleaning up the disorderly and unregulated, of streamlining and rendering effective and efficient. The dawning "science" of psychiatry placed woman literally at centre stage with the celebrated lectures of French neurologist Jean-Marie Charcot who hypnotised hospitalised women to demonstrate dramatic fits.

"[H]is clinic at Salpêtrière 'became the neurologists' Mecca'. The Salpêtrière was a notoriously famous Parisian asylum for women diagnosed as 'incurably insane'. Crowds gathered to witness Charcot's 'Tuesday lectures', and to watch the 'virtuosic performances' of hysterics by his patients."⁴

Amongst those who travelled from across Europe to view the spectacle of women presented by Charcot was Sigmund Freud later to be hailed as a herald of the new ethos who had liberated people from superstition and prudery. There is a natural line of genealogy from the witch hunts of early modern Europe to Marie Antoinette with her compulsive fashion buying, her befeathered – soon to be removed head and her supposed polyvalent orgies to the psychiatrists' thoroughly modern patients, as outsiders to the norm. The Surrealist movement foregrounded the irrational and the sexual against the repression of the bourgeoisie, and women were both a core problem and fixation. Some women artists such as Meret Oppenheim found in surrealism's validation of the fantastical and the irrational a space to begin to operate and the inheritances of surrealism have proven in the longterm to be empowering to women artists. Concurrently modernist creativity of the early to mid twentieth century seemed to be framed by silenced and censored women who have been subsequently belittled as "mad" by generations of often male critics: Zelda Fitzgerald, Lucia Joyce, Vivienne Eliot, Olga Khoklova, Dora Maar, Jean Rhys, even to a degree Vivien Leigh and Sylvia Plath (both certainly validated on their terms as well). Their madness also indicated their second-rateness, their not-maleness, their not-genius – despite all these women living close to "great men", as lovers, wives or daughters. In this new science the state of being female was to be a *priori* unstable and performative, eternally registering as being alien to the state of rationality and responsibilities of public and social life. However what was once a diagnosis of unfitness to operate in public life now has been embraced by women artists as a brief, a manifesto. The spectacle orchestrated by Charcot for gentlemen and medical students has been transformed by artists and creative women as agents and auteurs into feminist performance art. Even in the nineteenth century, Victorian mediums of all degrees of sincerity or fraudulence, utilized their fame and popularity to create a new personalised theater of display where the female medium was in control and offered wonders and new ideas and sensations to an admiring public.

However hysterical, dramatic, unstable narratives have always surrounded women artists in popular culture and threatened to overshadow their artmaking and professional achievements: Artemesia Gentilleschi, Elisabetta Sirani, Elisabeth Sidall, Camille Claudel, Susan Valadon, Anna Mendietta and in Australia Joy Hester and Carol Jerrems. Yet with the new legitimacy of popular culture, these hyperdramas about women practitioners are as telling as "mastery" over form, design, colours and techniques to document the impact of female creativity. Popular culture and entertainment underpins the ongoing cultural relevance of established tropes and fantasies, and their tenacity in public memory.

Snakes on a Plane and Women in a Gallery - what is the big deal?

The question about women artists' status still continues to enliven forums such as Linked In where an international audience of various nationalities and level of expertise debate whether feminism in art is

dead or still urgently needed, whether it is insulting to women artists or limiting of their options. Have women artists been unduly forgotten, discriminated against or, as in classical wisdom still alive amongst an older generation and across many cultures, that it is quality as such as gender that has always counted. Over the past half decade or so there is certainly a documented interest internationally around curatorially revisiting women's art – including such major shows as *Elles@Pompidou*, 2009 *Rebelle* 2010 in the Netherlands and *Wack!* 2007 in the United States. 2012 brought similar Australian events the Queensland Art Gallery *Contemporary Australia: Women*, that was enormously popular with professionals and public alike and also highly informative at a national level, the debut presentation of the Cruthers Collection of Women Artists at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia and associated conference and a feminist art forum and festival run by Melbourne artists: *A Dinner Party: setting the table*.

There is currently an incipient fourth wave of feminist practice with the current interest amongst very young emerging practitioners in 'craftivism', 'new crafts', 'neo-craft' and craft-based nostalgia which curiously traverses the whole political spectrum from 'guerrilla knitting' to 'Madmen-inspired retro', to wearing and retailing vintage clothes, to the extreme capitalist banality of the over-iced cupcake explosion, with its sugary ziggurat of frosting quite unlike the original patty-pan cakes of the Menzies era. This new emerging fourth wave is linked to grass roots and sub-cultural expressions such as the 'slow' movement, green and sustainability community activism, anti-technological interventions and urban cultural jamming. Many of these re/new[ed] media and techniques are referenced in Aldahn and Harris' exhibition. The emphasis on making, on opting in, on developing sometimes selective historical narratives to justify precedents that are strongly female-centric, indicates that this potential fourth wave of feminism is linked to the flattening and broadening of cultural narratives under the fixed hierarchies of the canon and tapping into the enthusiasm and energy of popular culture.

Juliette Peers

1. Right Reverend Monsignor Goddard, letter dated March 25 1880, quoted in Alison McQueen *Empress Eugenie and the Arts: Politics and Visual Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, p. 295.
2. Both collection, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
3. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, 1992.
4. S. P. Wainwright, C. Williams, 'Giselle, madness & death,' *Med Humanities* 2004;30:79-81 [online] viewed March 2013, <http://medhums.com/content/30/2/79.full#xref-ref-16-1>.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The SASA Gallery supports a program of exhibitions focusing on innovation, experimentation and performance. With the support of the Division of Education, Art and Social Sciences, the SASA Gallery is being developed as a leading contemporary art space and as an active site of teaching and learning. The SASA Gallery showcases South Australian artists, designers, architects, writers and curators associated with the School of Art, Architecture and Design, University of South Australia, in a national and international context. The Director, SASA Gallery, would like to acknowledge the contribution to the development of the 2013 exhibition program by the SASA Gallery Programming Committee; Professor Mads Gaardboe, Head, AAD; and Professor Pal Ahluwalia, Pro-Vice Chancellor, DIVEASS, UniSA.

The SASA Gallery has received significant organisational support for *Ordinary Escapes and Other Magic*. Special thanks to the artists Celeste Aldahn and Ray Harris, for their generous participation in this exhibition, catalogue and associated events. This exhibition has been assisted by the South Australian Government through Carclew Youth Arts Board. Thank you to Logan MacDonald and FELTspace for assistance with gallery equipment. I would also like to thank Perrini Estate for their generous on-going support of the SASA Gallery exhibition program.

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Published by the SASA Gallery, University of South Australia
GPO Box 2471, Adelaide SA 5001
April 2013

ISBN: 978-0-9873951-3-9

Printed by Finsbury Green

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Images:

Front: Ray Harris, *She blows blizzards*, HD digital video still, 2013

Middle: Celeste Aldahn, *UV Flower Bed*, 2013

Back: Celeste Aldahn, *Smiley Shrine*, 2012