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Art for under 5K + Michael Parekowhai, Heather B. Swann, Cressida Campbell, Tjariya Stanley and more



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Michael Lett & Andrew Thomas

MICHAEL LETT, AUCTIONEER

The Auckland gallery Michael Lett has represented Michael Parkinson since 2003. Gallery director Michael Lett said, "Long before I started working professionally with Michael [Parkinson] I was intrigued by his work, the way it references art and culture, and invites multiple interpretations. After spending time with Michael himself, and having had the privilege of hearing some of his stories, Michael's practice has become more meaningful to me. In 2011, Parkinson was selected as the representative artist for New Zealand at the Venice Biennale."



Petrina Hicks had only recently moved house when photographer Zan Wimberley came to visit. She told Wimberley she "spends a lot of time people-watching from her desk while she works."



Seductive Subversion

Petrina Hicks' is a technical master, using her photographic skills to camouflage the discomfort that underpins her compositions.

Carrie Miller speaks to Hicks about her forthcoming exhibitions.

PORTRAIT BY ZAN WIMBERLEY



From the moment **Petrina Hicks** made the switch from commercial photography to art photography, she had the makings of the singular style she is acclaimed for today.

After spending several years as a photographer's assistant and several more as a photographer herself she had developed a commercial visual vocabulary, the subversion of which, is one of the fundamental elements of her impeccably beautiful and uncanny artworks.

Frustrated by the lack of conceptual critique in commercial work and with the banality of ideas in the commercial world, Hicks's turned her focus to the possibilities of fine art photography. Importantly, this background gave her a technical facility that has become a perfect companion to her conceptual aims.

Since becoming a full-time artist, Hicks began producing a number of unforgettable images that combine her unique mix of a high-end commercial style with conceptual content, images that are simultaneously elusive and seductive. One such work is *Shenae and Jade*, which depicts a stationary moment of a child swallowing a bird – an image that's become familiar to many in the contemporary art world. It is typical of a Hicks photograph, combining dichotomous elements – bird versus human – that are often employed by the artist. It is also visually compelling, technically precise, and abstract in its meaning.

Indeed, all of Hicks's works sit between the idiosyncratic and the iconic. This ambivalent state that the images embody can be seen as a result of Hicks's approach to photography. As she says: "I've never used the camera in a spontaneous/documentary way. Making the photographs feels like creating sculptures in front of the lens."

This is precisely how **Robert McFarlane** describes Hicks's perhaps most compelling series of portraits; an albino girl called Lauren. In describing *Lauren* McFarlane says: "This is the closest I have seen photography come to slipping its two dimensional bonds to become sculpture."

Another aspect of this series highlights Hicks's original technique in the way she creates images where light and focus seem to almost emanate from the subjects themselves – unlike other art photographers who use commercial techniques to create slick surfaces.

This complication of the techniques of commercial photography is a purposeful one. As Hicks explains, "I held on to the aesthetic techniques I'd developed



1.
Petrina Hicks, *Shenae and Jade*, 2005. Lightjet print, 111 x 119cm.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND HELEN GORY GALLERY, MELBOURNE

2.
Petrina Hicks, *Venus*, 2013. C-type print, 100 x 100cm.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND STILLS GALLERY, SYDNEY

through working commercially, but it was the coding, language, sub-text I was aiming to subvert. I was aiming for these images to be misinterpreted as commercial images, by creating only slight ruptures to the surface of the image – by way of ambiguous meaning, lack of narrative completion to the image, or hinting at darker more subversive ideas – this worked to create a tension within the image. It worked in opposition to the pure and desirable surface aesthetic of the images. They were images that were hard to reconcile, or put in the category of commercial or art.

"So the images looked desirable on the surface, but I was aiming to corrupt this process of seduction. There are elements in my images that evoke desire and emotion, yet the images remain ambiguous, because the signs to decode them are absent."

This always leaves the viewer with a slightly uncomfortable feeling. Can they be sure what they are looking at? Is it even photography in the sense that we know it? Certainly the composition of Hicks's works makes you aware of reality as a psychological space – a place that can't be so easily represented by generic documentary-style

photography. At the same time, the work presents an otherworldly place, a place without context. As Hicks puts it, "The surface of the images are parading as commercial photographs, but the underlying ideas don't allow for the images to be consumed as such. I've always been drawn to the idea of creating images that are beautiful and desirable on the surface, that draw people in... but then gently pulling the rug away, before they've realised it. These images promise satisfaction, but don't deliver it in the expected way, the way we are conditioned to read commercial photographs."

Hicks' latest series explores, among other things, the essence of photography – what sets it apart from other mediums, particularly painting. Again she has produced a knock-out group of works where dichotomies circulate in strangely elegant ways, meaning remains open, and beauty is not about benign perfection.

A survey exhibition of Petrina Hicks' work will be held at Helen Gory Galerie in Melbourne from 12 June to 13 July 2013. Stills Gallery in Sydney will also stage a solo show of Hicks' work from 4 September to 5 October 2013.

3.

Petrina Hicks, *The Hand that Feeds* (diptych), 2013. Pigment print, two parts: 100 x 100cm, and 100 x 110cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND STILLS GALLERY, SYDNEY

4.

Petrina Hicks, *Ghost in the Shell*, 2008. Single-channel video, 2min loop.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND HELEN GORY GALLERY, MELBOURNE

5.

Petrina Hicks, *New Age*, 2013. C-type print, 100 x 100cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND STILLS GALLERY, SYDNEY



Bronwyn Rennex

DIRECTOR, STILLS GALLERY

Stills Gallery has represented **Petrina Hicks** since 2004. Her artworks came to the attention of **Bronwyn Rennex** when they were included in the Gold Coast City Art Prize and the Citigroup Photographic Portrait Prize, where they stood out amongst those of her peers. Rennex said, "Her profile has risen dramatically since then. She has exhibited her work widely through both solo and groups shows in Australia, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, USA, UK, Japan, China, Mexico and Brazil. Recently, her work was selected for the 17th International Videobrasil in Brazil and the Pingyao International Photography Festival in China. This year her video work *The Chrysalis* was included in The Guirguis New Art Prize, a new national acquisitive contemporary art prize featuring a selection of Australia's most exciting contemporary artists.

"Petrina's works belong to various public and private collections including: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Queensland Art Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria and Artbank. She has been awarded various notable prizes and residencies including the *Josephine Ulrick Photography Award for Portraiture*, *ABN Emerging Artist Award* (2008), *La Cité*, Paris Residency and an eight month Fellowship with Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany.

"Petrina's artwork has attracted many collectors of contemporary art both in Australia and abroad, who have acquired her work in depth and continue to support her work. We find that her images linger in peoples' minds long after they have first seen them. Often people will come in to enquire about the availability of a work they had seen years before."

Carrie Miller



Helen Ennis

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, ANU SCHOOL OF ART

Helen Ennis has been an admirer of Petrina Hicks' work for some time: "For me one of the sure signs of a successful work of art is its after-affect or to be more specific, what I see or sense when I shut my eyes. In the case of **Petrina Hicks**'s photographs and video works I am left with a great deal that I really value and enjoy. It's to do with their concentrated energy, thoughtfulness and very particular kind of allure.

"Take as an example her video, *Ghost in the shell*, in which the camera circles around a young ponytailed woman, smoke emanating from her mouth. The endless, slow, noiseless movement around the figure is very satisfying, revealing yet concealing meaning. There is in fact a paradox in operation in much of Petrina's work. By this I mean that many of her photographs, especially those produced before 2010, are empty in terms

of action and yet somehow seem full of import. There is something in them that is suggestive and significant though I cannot tell you exactly what it is and do not expect to ever be able to do so.

"I am also enjoying seeing the evolution of Petrina's creative practice over time. Recently she has been using more saturated colours and even greater artificiality. What is consistent though, is her pared down, tightly controlled vocabulary and the elimination of extraneous details. Her compositions always appear straightforward, even when the set-up is the result of considerable effort.

"Petrina Hicks is one of the most exciting artists working in photography and video in Australia today. Her works stay with me because of their absence of agitation and the strange, empty space that they so successfully create," comments Ennis.

Carrie Miller



4.