

2006

Death Lilly : Performing the 'Flower Girl' role in the Age of Consumption

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Death Lilly
Performing the 'flower girl' role in the age of consumption

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Diploma of Photography

This thesis is presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Communications Honours (Photomedia)

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October 2006

USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

This self-reflexive photomedia project interrogates the 'flower girl' role as a cultural fetishism of 'innocent' white-girl femininity, which I claim is perpetuated in the bridal fantasy. In my photomedia work the theme of 'death' and the uncanny is explored as well as the themes of 'wildness' and 'violence' in order to subvert the dominant discourse of ideal white femininity which is defined in popular culture by a sanitised bourgeois aesthetic. I attack the bourgeois surface of the bridal magazine in my artwork as I perform the 'flower girl' role in the context of popular culture and capitalism. The flower girl role, historically a fertility symbol, regenerated into the age of consumption is symbolic of a fertile capitalist economy. Inspired by the work of the feminist artist Barbara Kruger, in *Death Lilly* the bridal magazine is deconstructed and re-appropriated. I do this to expose the flower girl as an agent for white, middle-class, Western ideals of femininity which I argue provide a counter to the liberations of feminism and are oppressive to young girls. I seek to give rise to a more multi-dimensional narrative than what is presented in the homogenous bridal culture. Furthermore, in uncovering repressed personal memory, my photomedia work attempts to illustrate a way in which meaning can be inscribed into a symbolic object outside of consumptive process.

DECLARATION

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, with acknowledgement extended to all members of my immediate family. I extend the warmest gratitude and appreciation to the gracious encouragement and guidance of my dedicated supervisor Dr Panizza Allmark who has facilitated a tradition, certainly in my view, worth passing on. I also sincerely thank the thinkers and artists whom have contributed insight and/or encouragement to my work, especially Dr Mardie O’Sullivan, Dr Rod Giblett, Norm Leslie, my peers in the Honours room, The Developing Tank, Justin Spiers and PCP. Many thanks go to my friends and ‘family’ Louisa Bannah, Felix Potier, Ed Dwyer, Eva and Karri Douglas, David Haworth and Liz and Bernadette Philips for their support and understanding in the most intense stages of my artistic process. This project was also made possible by the efforts of the SC+CA media support team and photomedia technicians, and ECU curatorial services.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Attacking the Bourgeois Surface 9

Miss Consumption: the bridal entrée 17

The Hardcore Nymphette 27

References 35

List of Figures

<i>Queen Mary's Camera-Conscious Flower Girl</i>	8
<i>Death Lilly in Concert</i>	9
<i>In the Beginning...</i>	13
<i>The Sperm Donor</i>	13
<i>Sexy, Single and Looking for Love</i>	23
<i>Basket Case</i>	23
<i>Every Little Girl's Dream</i>	25
<i>The Plague</i>	27

Introduction

This photomedia project interrogates the role of the ‘flower girl’ in the contemporary Australian pseudo-Christian ‘white wedding’. In my work, the white-wedding is defined as pseudo-Christian because it can follow Christian traditions, but its agenda is more significantly political than religious. The ‘white wedding’ that is signified, particularly by the display of the bride’s ‘feminine’ white wedding dress which is symbolically replicated in the dress in the flower girl, is the political embodiment of white western bourgeois sexism, classism and racism (Ingraham, 1999). The ideal image of the bride promoted in the bridal fantasy is usually a young, white, heterosexual, and middle-class female. This ideal femininity as defined in the white wedding is imbricated in popular culture and capitalism.

I view the white wedding’s primary purpose as a fashion parade that promenades the achievements of capitalism. I propose that the flower girl in the context of the bridal fashion system is the embodiment of ‘white-girl femininity’. I use the term white-girl femininity to distinguish the flower girl as a cultural practice that follows the conventions of white Western patriarchal girlhood which is on display, such as the tropes of ‘innocence’, ‘vulnerability’, ‘playfulness’ and ‘charm’ (Wald, 1998; Young, 1990). Moreover, the performance of the flower girl can be closely linked to Stratton’s (1996) discussions of the desirable body, in which he discusses commodity fetishism and cultural fetishism. He comments that this fetishism of the young female developed in the middle of the 19th Century in Western Europe, and interestingly it is around the same time the popularity of the white wedding was emerging. I consider that the flower girl can be considered a desired object of consumption and is imbued as a ‘marketable’ commodity within the Western capitalist agenda of weddings. Stratton (1996, p.39) highlights that the female body may be seen as “one of the building blocks of consumer culture” and as such I argue that the flower girl becomes part of the commodity fetishism, and furthermore a cultural fetishism of the innocent look of ‘appropriate’ girlhood. The look of innocence is defined in body language as well as the style and dress of the flower girl.

Defined primarily by patriarchal conventions, but translated via matrilineal tradition, the flower girl is also subject to matriarchy, in which the wedding organisation and bridal party is very much a domain controlled by women. The wedding preparation is the

expression of feminine desire, and wearing the dress is inscribed with feminine meaning (Friese, 2001). Friese (2001) states that in the postmodern view the consumption of the object is not merely its devouring and destruction, but is also the site where its meaning is created. The flower girl, rarely the consumer but often the symbol of consumption, is therefore a recipient of a generated meaning, in which she is a passive conveyer of capitalist ideals. In this view, the flower girl is oppressed in a politicised fashion system that best serves, in terms of representation, the interests of the adult female, rather than the girl. I acknowledge in my work that the culturally inscribed definitions of children's sexuality are from the adult rather than the childhood imaginary, and it is children's lack of self-representative agency that renders them oppressed. My work attempts to mobilise a feminist discussion of girlhood and the significance of the dress or cloth worn by the flower girl, which signifies white-girl femininity and also capitalist consumption.

Massey's (cited in Rowe and Lindsey, 2003, p.175) definition of white femininity is employed in terms of the suburban veneer characterised by the outward appearance of health, order and legitimacy, and maintained in opposition to the hidden underworld of 'wild sexuality' and 'violence'. The underworld can, moreover, be related to the uncanny. The re-analysis of Freud's uncanny by Giblett (1996, 2006) and Allmark (2002, 2003) opens up possibilities for a feminist consideration of my photographic production. The uncanny embraces feminist concepts, which allow for contradictions to co-exist, in its attempt to uncover what is hidden and repressed. I attempt this in presenting photomontages that rework the image of the flower girl to highlight the veneer of appropriate white femininity and the flower girl's historical positioning within the discourse. I also embrace Allmark's (2003, p. 129) photographic theorisation of the uncanny, which is "concerned with ambiguity and the blurring of boundaries" and I accomplish this through the use of photomontage. As such, the uncanny also reworks the traces of the past and "returns the subject momentarily to the unconscious and to the surfaces of the body which have been inscribed, and some of whose depths have been invested, by capitalism" (Giblett, 1996, p. 34). This is a significant point in which I highlight that the flower girl is a symbol of capitalism and the death of 'nature', alluding to a time of pre-capitalism. Claiming the wedding celebrates money over nature I have explored options in combining the flower girl's dress with flowers in order to restore the flower girl's symbolic connection with nature.

I refer to my work as Death Lilly, drawing upon the notion of the uncanny and the swamp from which the lily originates. I use the common spelling of “Lilly” for a girl’s name, instead of “Lily” for the flower’s name, to denote the personification of life from the swamp. Giblett (2006, p. 306) argues “the swamp is a secular underworld”. The swamp as discussed by Giblett (1996) is not related to the masculine aesthetic conventions of the beautiful or the picturesque, but the feminine counter-aesthetic of the uncanny. In its murky zone there is a space that is outside the conventions of sanitised bourgeois aesthetics. In “roughing-up” the bourgeois aesthetic of the bridal magazine, my photomedia work defiles its sterile surface. In contorted bodies and faces, mismatched bodices and skirts and inconsistent skin tones of the hands and face, the constructiveness of the picturesque is exposed. Maintaining its stylistic conventions to a point where the aesthetic of commercial advertising is recognised, but in subverting them, the swamp is conveyed as a compromise between the completely raw and the highly manipulated surface. This compromise is a murky zone. As such, utilising the counter-aesthetic of the uncanny the flower girl’s ‘life’ can be resurrected through the uncovering of the “dread and horror” and what may appear ‘frightening’ (Freud cited in Giblett, 2006, p. 301). In my work this also involves revisiting memories of my past in which I was positioned in the role of the flower girl.

In my work I revisit my childhood modelling experience, where my sister and I both performed the flower girl role in a bridal fashion parade. We paraded the flower girl dresses my mother made on the ‘aisle’, the catwalk, in front of a crowd of almost exclusively white women at the Leichardt Hotel, which was a popular, but expensive, wedding reception venue in Rockhampton, Queensland. I have never been a ‘real’ flower girl as such, that is, I have never performed the role of the flower girl in a wedding ceremony. Nevertheless, I have a long-held perceptual difficulty in making a distinction between the flower girl’s performance as it takes place in the wedding as opposed to the fashion parade. To simplify the flower girl’s performance to a matter of mechanics, the flower girl typically walks down the aisle before the bride scattering flower petals from a basket. The flower girl’s performance on the catwalk is the same. Performing as the flower girl in the context of the fashion parade has had a profound affect in how I view the role. In the flower girl role, the girl’s body is subject to the adult gaze and can thus serve as a vehicle for adult desires. Presented as a spectacle the flower girl’s objectification is inherent in the process of commodity fetishism which “operates in terms of sight” (Stratton, 1996, p. 47).

Death Lilly is therefore a body of artwork counter-memorial to my flower girl performance. In the way that Hermanstad's (2005, p.4) photographic project sought to explore an experience of childhood which rendered her "haunted by the 'whore' stigma", in my work the focus is on the stigma of the 'flower girl' or the 'innocent'. Death Lilly, a series of digitally produced photographic prints, is the construction of an imaginary body intended to subvert the dominant white-girl identity as played out in the flower girl role. The girl's body appears as a fragmented form. Across the series I employ the consistent juxtaposition of two icons. The icons are The Death Lily (Arum Lily) displayed in its plural, and my face from the photograph of my childhood flower girl performance. Death Lilly's bodily form is fragmented throughout the series in order to interrogate the homogeneity of 'appropriate' bourgeois white-girl femininity by giving rise to the appearance of the 'undesirable other'.

To subvert appropriate bourgeois white-girl femininity I code some of my images with the "Barbie Pink" discussed by Ingraham (1999, p.81) as employed in toy catalogues to flag little girls to the pages which advertise the products intended for their use. In other images I create a murkiness of the insipid by using a de-saturated colour scheme. A (s)lime green is used to make reference to the plant life of the swamp, which can grow over or float upon other surfaces. Yellowish skin tones denote a toxic overload of human waste. Commercial photographers are usually obsessed with creating the most flattering colour of skin tones and most flawless of surfaces. However, in my images the yellow skin tones of my recycled hyper-real subjects reveal a socio-ecological jaundice that is usually concealed in advertising. The subtly imperfect or sick 'other' is undesirable in this bourgeois imaginary, which is however the mechanism by which the characteristics of such undesirability is maintained. The wetlands are sometimes described as the kidneys of the environment (Mitsch and Gosselink cited in Giblett, 1996). Giblett (1996, p.136) states "the production of human nitrogenous waste is far exceeding the capacity of the environmental kidneys to deal with it". Like society's effect on the wetlands, the insidious bridal fantasy affects Death Lilly's capacity to deal with society when she is absorbed into it and controlled by it. Her jaundice disappears when she is so overcome by the sickness that she signifies the plague or death.

My photomedia work both drives and is driven by the concept of symbolic death.

Whitford (1994, p.390) states of Irigaray's death drive that it is only contradictory upon attempts to ascertain its definition, as death in the imaginary is both the mobilisation and the immobilisation of fragmentation. In this sense the imaginary death occurs as a fragmentation of the symbolic. This contradiction is presented by the fragmentation of Death Lilly's self in the series of artwork. The flower girl's dress is located as being of central symbolic importance in the wedding ceremony. Therefore, in terms of the symbolic, Death Lilly's dress is significant. Hence, in order to communicate the multi-dimensional via the flower girl's dress, in Death Lilly the flower girl 'shape shifts' between contexts. For example, a bridal gown, a power suit or a crypt statue, the bodily-formic transformation is, like memory, non-linear.

The research approach is a self-reflexive analysis of an event from my personal history. Furthermore, I have employed an approach which resembles Reinhartz's (1992) Feminist Multiple Methods Research. Reinhartz (1992, p.197) describes this method as enabling the linking of past and present, "data gathering" and action, and individual behaviour within social frameworks." Furthermore, the 'journey' of a feminist multiple researcher, is one of risk-taking, commitment to thoroughness and is open-ended (Reinhartz, 1992). Reinhartz (1992) argues the multiple methods approach is credible, and has much potential to illuminate previously unexamined or misunderstood experiences. In my feminist photomedia practice, I have begun to illuminate a misunderstood girlhood experience of the flower girl's performance.

Isaak (1996, p.6) states,

"The feminist intervention in art history entails looking not just at the contents of that discourse, the purported premises of that history, but also what it pretends not to be about, particularly the myth of its economic, political and sexual innocence".

In my work I am interrogating the history and representations of the flower girl as well as recalling memories of my past. As Barthes (cited in Gray, 2003) suggests narrative is what makes up life. Furthermore, Dawson (cited in Gray, 2003) argues the cultural importance of story-telling is found in the stories we tell ourselves and others, as well as in cultural products. Gray (2003) urges that narratives should be questioned in terms of how they serve to empower people, but also how they can control and dominate others. I have considered representations of the flower girl in the wedding and the use of motifs

pertaining to her role enacting the dominant consumerist discourse of girlhood is the culturally dominant story of the flower girl's role. In my research this story is combined with an image-making approach based on personal experience, a personal story. I have attempted to subvert the dominant discourse by allowing a more multi-dimensional story to emerge. Gray (2003, p.108) argues "story-telling allows the inter-relatedness of different areas of women's lives to emerge". Although I have sought to establish that the bridal fantasy narrative has different implications for women than for girls, the story-telling approach also illuminates the inter-relatedness of the bridal role and the flower girl role, and in that process simultaneously reveals their differences.

The photomedia work thus serves as a reminder of my childhood memory in which I subvert the symbol of the flower girl. Batchen (2004) questions whether childhood memories can be replaced by photographs. Drawing upon Barthes' notion of the photographic counter-memory, Batchen (2004) presents a complexity of the concept of photographic memory in discussing the kind of meaning we call 'photographic' as one which involves an exact and self-conscious recall of past events, scenes or texts. Then challenging that meaning by presenting examples of photographs from the 1800s that are more concerned with remembrance and reverie, Batchen (2004) states that in today's context the images are also encoded with nostalgia, which is also a marketable commodity. There seems to be no other stage of life revered with as much nostalgia as childhood, which means photographs that stand in for childhood memories are a valuable and marketable commodity.

Kracauer (in Batchen, 2004) argues that memory is tied in with significance and, because photography operates on a spatial and temporal continuum presenting what is given rather than what is subjectively significant, photography is too coherent and linear to function as memory. In a conversation with my mother regarding her account of my performance she said, "I hate to tell you Cath, but you were a *model* flower girl". In Barthes' notion of memory it is a sensation and not so much an image, and for a photograph to serve as a memory it needs to be something that can not only be seen, but also felt (in Batchen, 2004).

Berlatsky (2003) states the historical 'real' is a site of political contestation. Certainly, a contestation in memory has occurred between myself, my mother and my sister. My sister, who is two years younger than me, claims to not remember very much about the

event at all, although she has a “vague” recollection she interestingly attributes more of her memory to the photographs from the event than the actual experience of the event. Perhaps for her the photographs have operated as Barthes’ (in Batchen, 2004) notion of the counter-memory: the memory of the experience is blocked by the photograph which replaces the memory.

What is subjectively significant about the flower girl photographs of my childhood is that my perceived innocent sexuality was used to endorse a sexist fashion system that continues to oppress women and especially young girls, through its limited representations of femininity which promote Western capitalist ideals. Any definition of femininity based on valorisation in terms of “beauty” that is measured in terms of an economic capacity to obtain products and services, is bound to exclude and to be emotionally unfulfilling and also pits women in economic competition with each other. This is collectively defeating for a collective sense of liberated femininity. Given my mother designed the dresses, organised for me to model them and prescribed the appropriate behaviours for that performance, the photographic representation is obviously more indicative of how I was expected to look and behave than how I actually experienced the performance. The described situation, whereby the decisions about the flower girl performance are not her own, is typical of the white wedding ceremony. Therefore, the flower girl identity, contained within socially inscribed notions of gender, situates girls in a currency of social exchange where value is defined in terms of beauty and desirability.

Hey (1997) describes the pressures experienced by girls in keeping up the appearance of ‘appropriate’ bourgeois femininity in opposition to an ‘other’ negative reference group. An ‘other’ reference group serves to maintain the exclusivity of the desired appearance. In the photograph titled *Flower Girl at a Wedding* by Diane Arbus (2003) the appearance of health, order and legitimacy that characterises the bourgeois white girl is challenged by her 1964 photograph of a deranged-looking flower girl. Butler (2004) argues the bourgeois norms of presenting only certain surfaces which Arbus worked against in her time still remain. Butler (2004) describes Arbus as working outside of the social expectations of a Jewish woman, and in the manner of many an Anti-Christ or pagan avenger. Butler (2004) describes the flower girl’s gaze into the photographer’s camera (albeit along with that of others’ who have been subjects of Arbus) as suspicious.

In my photographic practice I have sought to expose that which characterises appropriate bourgeois girlhood femininity as primarily surface. Therefore, I have regarded the camera's typical use on the flower girl in bridal culture with a similar suspicion to the flower girl Arbus photographed. In the current tradition of the white wedding ceremony which arose in the late 18th Century, the flower girl's role is characterised by constructiveness, superficiality and overt consumerist marketability. I deal with the notion that the flower girl has suspicions of her own in the image *Queen Mary's Camera-Conscious Flower Girl*. According to Pauline Stevenson (1978, p.12)

The last important Royal bride of the 19th Century was Princess May of Teck, known to most of us as Queen Mary, who married the Duke of York, afterwards George V, in 1893...Although the older girls look reserved and rather expressionless, the younger five grouped around the bride's chair and sitting on the floor are all chatting away to each other totally oblivious of the camera. Only one is camera conscious.

I put myself in a context of being the one camera-conscious flower girl in the photograph of Queen Mary's wedding to mark the beginnings of my photographic process contesting bridal culture's symbolic white femininity as "innocent".



Queen Mary's Camera-Conscious Flower Girl (2006)

Attacking the Bourgeois Surface

In order to *exorcise* the repressive ‘innocent’ stigma, from my imaginary, *Death Lilly* emerges from the *underworld*. I use the term ‘exorcise’ to acknowledge that my self-reflexive approach to my project has seen repressed memory resurface as a necessity of the research. I use the term ‘underworld’ to denote my attempts in my practice to pay respect to more aspects of life than what are displayed and celebrated by the white wedding ceremony. In *Death Lilly* I use the concept of death to challenge the bridal identity. This is most notably highlighted in my image *Death Lilly in Concert* where the self-destructed or ‘dead’ flower girl appears in a bridal body and revealing her ‘experience’ as affected by exposure to the bridal fantasy myth.



Death Lilly in Concert (2006)

The flower girl is revered in the context of Death Metal fandom. This contextualisation is based on an observation that Death Metal fans will often congregate in groups wearing the same t-shirt of their favourite bands (or artists) as each other. Hence, *Death Lilly*’s fans wear her face on their black t-shirt to honour her. In this context the innocent flower girl is exposed as a patriarchal ideal of femininity, which is also a satire of the ‘desirable body’ as a child bride. Therefore, in my photomedia work I attempt to

affect the myth of the bridal fantasy and the collective sense of bridal identity. Since the bride is at the centre of the bridal industry's effect and yet simultaneously affects the market, the bride is central to the simulation of the bridal fantasy myth. Death Lilly is therefore an attempt to affect the consciousness that perpetuates the flower girl's exploitative representation.

This work is therefore intended to serve a socially active purpose. I have sought to challenge the dominant discourse of the flower girl as a cultural fetish which serves to promote an ideal that is about adult desires and bourgeois tastes. Zimmerman (1994, p.269) states that "unless democratically minded activists address the loss of meaning felt by people living in a confusing, destructive, and mythically bankrupt world, then it is possible that activists with a far different orientation will step in". As mentioned earlier, the dominant definition of white femininity is maintained in opposition to an underworld other characterised by wild sexuality and violence (Massey cited in Rowe and Lindsey, 2003, p.175). 'Wild', in terms of Daly's (2005) definition, means being conscious of the artificial walls of construction severing women from ourselves, each other and the natural world. Mathews (1991, p.1) defines the ecofeminist portrayal of the natural world as "a community of beings, related, in the manner of the family, but nevertheless distinct". Death Lilly is violent in the style of Irigaray's (cited in Whitford, 1994) 'emerged woman' who threatens a loss of identity and induces a fear of death. Wild sexuality pertaining to girlhood is therefore defined in its experiential existence outside the impositions of adult world's artificial constructions, and in its sense of inter-relatedness within the natural world. Irigaray (cited in Burke, 1997, p.38) discusses female sexuality as "being undefinable within the familiar rules of (masculine) logic," and, I add, capitalist structures.

Irony was at play in the creation of Death Lilly, an imaginary flower girl identity constructed from the same matter that characterises the bridal identity. In this sense the bridal identity is considered immobilised or fixed in the context of the bridal industry. The fixed identity is a cultural fetish, and this fetishisation renders the identity in a sense inanimate. The bridal identity is characterised by fantasy or a fixation on the surface presented in the bridal magazine. This mere surface is an object upon which the desired appearance can be projected. In my photomedia work I target the objectification of the flower girl in the bridal fantasy by manipulating the surface to animate the inanimate, which is a process also closely aligned with the uncanny.

Ironically conscious of the camera's use in the construction of the flower girl as fetish I have not actually used a camera to produce any of the prints. As Stratton (1996, p.60) argues, in the history of photography "rather than being concerned with increasingly faithful representations of 'reality'", it has "emphasised the ability to (re)constitute the work in the image of fetishised experience...". Moreover, as Stratton (1996, p.69) highlights, it reinforces a "cultural fetishistic" process. In order to subvert the fetishism of the bourgeois aesthetic, I advertently attempt to highlight the non-marketable aspects of the flower girl persona in my photographic work. The digital images are montages composed of scanned visual data. The brides and flower girls are taken from bridal magazines and juxtaposed with images from books or other genres of magazines. By appropriating a range of inanimate (or dead) data, the surface is exposed as such. In the process of scanning the underside of the magazine page, surface registers on the digital copy. In refraining from the complete concealment of the imperfect surface created in this photographic process the technique serves as an analogy for those aspects of underworld femininity not celebrated in the bourgeois surface. It represents the uncanny in its returning of the repressed aspects of capitalist production (Allmark, 2003, p.176).

Whilst Irigaray (cited in Whitford, 1994) is concerned with a male imaginary I translate her concept of the death drive into the female, including the feminist, imaginary. Irigaray (cited in Whitford, 1994) argues that death in the symbolic is not only destructive but can also be creative. I take it as a given that death images also occur in the female imaginary, and I work against the influential images of the bridal and fashion industries' advertising. Rather than present myself as a role model for girls, I use my childhood image to interrogate the consciousness of adults concerning children, and especially girls. I shall reiterate here it is the nature of our social, economic and political system which gives rise to the representative power of only certain adults. The dominant bourgeoisie gained a strength which previously belonged to the aristocracy late in the eighteenth century with the rise of the capitalist economy. Capitalism was a distinctly modern form of society in which human sociality and subjectivity was revolutionised (Marx in Sayer, 1991). For Marx (cited in Sayer, 1991) capitalism gave rise to the notion of the individual, whilst under pre-capitalism the living individual's social position was defined in terms of their position in the community: everyone was someone's something. However, Sayer (1991) acknowledges Marx's conception of the individual as independent of social context as applicable only to men, and even then to

only some men. Marx (cited in Sayer, 1991) argues that all social bonds appear external to the individual, and therefore all exchange is superficial. In this view the body's social, and therefore political, agency takes place on the surface rather than within the self. Relationships, therefore, serve the purpose of maintaining the individual's appearance of social status (Sayer, 1991). Marriage in the white wedding ceremony in its attention to the surface is perhaps an example.

However, the 'love' marriage as opposed to the 'arranged marriage' is discussed by Sayer (1991) as an example of where capitalism has supposedly mobilised individuality as independent from the social. As it is centrally capital which is celebrated in the white wedding, 'love' in this form of marriage is symbolised as commitment to money and the material. Capitalism may have made class boundaries more porous in providing non-aristocratic couples with an agency they may not have had otherwise. Perhaps capitalism has provided people with more choices over their partnerships, but the new princess who becomes a queen with spending power is a fake. The artificial walls of construction (Daly, 2005) reside not only in the imaginary but the material. The material that renders the body with a certain agency in the feminine imaginary, then sacrifices its agency in actuality. The gown that symbolises the exchange of love, simultaneously symbolises its sacrifice to death, power and money (Irigaray cited in Whitford, 1994).

In her discussion of the bridal fantasy, which is more one of representations than actual experience, Driscoll (2002) suggests that in researching the bridal fantasy perhaps more accounts of experience are necessary. *We may know how it looks, but how does it feel to wear the bride's dress?* Driscoll (2002) presents the potential of the performance of the bridal role as an empowering fantasy of self-discovery. In her discussion on 'becoming the bride', Driscoll (2002) levers off the film *Muriel's Wedding* and its exploration of the main character Muriel in her imagined and then, transformative, process of becoming a bride. In presenting an observation of brides-to-be entering bridal shops and partaking in a performative fantasy of bridehood, bridal culture is recognised as an exclusive club for women (Driscoll, 2002).

Friese (2001) outlines the liminal space occupied by the consumer as the bride-to-be. The liminal space is where the bridal gown's meaning is created as sacred over profane (Friese, 2001). Friese (2001) discusses the initiation of the woman into the new social

group which begins with the marriage proposal and facilitates an experience which becomes inscribed into the bridal gown and then passed on as an oral tradition within the group. Hence, meaning is not produced entirely or authentically from experience, but rather is a process of re-circulation within an existing group. Ingraham (1999) discusses the white wedding as an institutionalisation of heterosexuality in which the divide between the masculine and the feminine is exaggerated in the consumptive process. Friese (2001) discusses how the single woman partakes in a 'sacred' act by the consumption of the wedding dress, but enters the realm of the profane upon marriage. However, the flower girl's sacred wearing of the white dress in the wedding is actually profane in the context of capitalist consumption when it takes place as a usual mechanism of sociality. The marionette puppet strings in my image, *The Sperm Donor*, which is crudely drawn in with the digital paint tool, are symbolic of women's profane control of girls via the contemporary 'sacred' ritual.



In the Beginning... (2006)



The Sperm Donor (2006)

However, the puppet strings which operate the flower girl performance are also attached to the framed image of her biological father. Technically in the legal use of the term sperm donor, the father is economically devoid of responsibility for the child's upbringing. In this case, the flower girl's biological father's role is confined to being a donor of sperm. The capitalist bride hence exemplifies a societal shift from nature and biology in terms of reproduction. As sex and reproduction were the major themes celebrated in the pagan wedding ceremony, the young attendants were no doubt

symbolic of the children the couple would produce in the marriage. By removing “natural” reproduction from the equation, the contemporary flower girl represents reproduction in another sense. Rather, the flower girl is merely a reproduction of a magazine image.

None of this is to deny the patriarchal influence on the formation of the flower girl role as a fetishised commodity. Indeed, Death Lilly and the absent Bridegroom are both presented to be under the control of one of the bride’s hands, which denotes a matriarchal influence. In contrast to the flawless finish of the cover-girl, I explicitly reference patriarchal influence by manipulating the appearance of the puppeteering hand to mimic the techniques used in photographic images to depict powerful and rich men in magazines.

Therefore, I have constructed an ambiguous image in order to open a discussion of the wedding tradition’s complex relationship with patriarchy and matriarchy. Under my construction, what is on the surface is a lesbian bridal fantasy. On the one hand it appears as though a bride does not need a man to have a wedding. On the other, (albeit it is a man’s hand in my image), nor does she need a man to oppress a child. In terms of this symbolism it is arguably to some extent inconsequential whether it is patriarchal or matriarchal desires at play, because it is certainly symbolic that the particular symbol of the white bride is almost exclusively the image of a woman.

Furthermore, whilst it may be the donor’s prerogative to take the money and run, whereas the young girl has no say in her birth, Death Lilly and her father are, in any case, eternally linked by biology or nature. The brides are positioned before their framed beloved prehistoric fertility symbol, Venus of Willendorf, (Ruether, 2005). This image is manufactured in this way in order to add another dimension to its reading. The death of Mother Nature is inherent in the celebration of the ‘sisters’ with credit cards. In presenting the flower girl as conscious of the reduced male contribution to reproduction at the ceremony, I imply that the sacredness of both male and female procreative power experiences a profane death in consumer culture. In addition, in *In the Beginning...*, which can be viewed along side *The Sperm Donor*, and depicts a gold gilt framed couple precariously balancing upon the white wedding cake, represents a symbolic death of heterosexual passion to the institutionalised capitalist fantasy of the white wedding.

Batchen (2004) discusses the way photographs communicate the remembrance of the deceased via the presence of a framed subject in a photograph within a photograph. My images invite remembrance. The intended sobering subtext in *The Sperm Donor* is that the young girl suffers in a sisterhood founded upon consumerist identity-forming practices. Simply, the flower girl, the child, is ultimately the widow of this death. In my image, *In the Beginning...*, Death Lilly is accepted as part of the sisterhood. Yet, even so, in carrying the flowers she stands out from a crowd who are intoxicated by the glamour of the ceremony. Death Lilly may be viewed as naïve in her belief that in the beginning it was about nature, but in this instance she chooses to say it with flowers instead of a dress. When the items on the average girl's shopping wish list reside in the sky, the place Western culture associates with God, the flower girl throws up her hands. Perhaps this looks like she is joining in on the festivities like the others. However, obviously aware of the camera, Death Lilly demands her role in the sisterhood be observed.

Perhaps the spirit of sacred sisterhood solidarity allows the "feminist in brideland" (Walker, 2000, p.230) to claim that although her credit card balance may betray her, she survived Brideland with her "feminist consciousness still intact". Walker (2000, p.228) recognises the ways in which feminists too are targeted by the bridal industry.

Walker (2000) states,

"The feminist bride who wants to make a statement with her dress will have to pay to do so, both in that the wedding gown is the single most expensive item of clothing that most women will ever buy in their lifetime and in that she removes herself from other women who cannot afford to make the correct fashion statement.

Walker's brideland self-reflexivity shoots through the illusion of the 'minimalist style bride' as less conventional and less spellbound by romanticism but more sophisticated and rational than the 'traditional style' bride. Walker's (2000) comprehensive analysis of bridal fashions left her with no version of bridal beauty that does not implicate women into the social hierarchies that support dominant ideals of female beauty. However, in recognising an inextricable link between the politics of fashion and its pleasures, it apparently remained in Walker's (2000) view her feminist prerogative to not sacrifice one to avoid the other.

I contest the view of the individual in capitalism as independent from social context. Walker (2000) is uncannily right that there is no version of bridal beauty that does not support dominant ideals of female beauty. Whilst Walker (2000) may have been discussing a lesbian wedding, she as an individual escapes gender inequality at least at the personal level of her marriage. Furthermore, if Walker (2000) had a flower girl in her ceremony it remains unmentioned. Ironically perhaps it was the lack of flower girl in her wedding that left her discussion short-sighted in my view. There is a pertinent social problem with the woman's desire Walker (2000) celebrates in the material. To be fair, the dress she wore was the product of many hours of her own labour and she collected some second-hand vintage materials. Perhaps also in her attention to exposing her process, Walker (2000) deviated from the norm of consumer spending which characterises the bridal identity. However, it was Walker's (2000) mention of her questionable credit card balance which indeed betrays her, as it is precisely toward this kind of 'intact' feminist consciousness that Death Lilly's violence is directed.

Miss Consumption: the bridal entrée

Contrary to the Utopia consumer culture endorses at the site of popular culture, consumption does not mean that men and women stand at the 'altar' as equals today. Irigaray (cited in Ward, 1997) asks equal to whom? Ward (1997) states that the problem of the other, both as specific and general, arises in the notion of difference. Ward (1997) further recognises some major obsessions of both postmodern and modern thinking. The notion of difference as illusion is postmodernist, and the obsession with origin is modernist. Since it is seemingly the cloth which keeps the bridal fantasy and the flower girl identity intact, this illusory origin is explored in my research of the flower girl as the other.

As I attempt to explain the flower girl's origins I concern myself with the symbolic by tracing the origins of the material which informs the flower girl's dominant cultural identity. The body as an object of the imaginary is linked with the classical Greek notions of materiality and signification (Butler, 1994). The classical Greek statue of memory is a woman lavished in layers of cloth (Batchen, 2004). Butler (1994, p.145) states "that which matters about an object is in its matter". In terms of its recognition the clothes the body wears are therefore indissoluble from its matter (Butler, 1994). The origins of the flower girl's dress are important when she is only recognised in her ceremonial garb.

In the contemporary white wedding, in wearing a similar white gown to the bride, the flower girl's dress presents her as a miniature bride. There is a wealth of representations of the bride and discussions of them. The role is certainly significant in terms of representations of the boundaries of socially appropriate or accepted behaviours generated via notions of gender. The flower girl role is closely linked with the bridal role. Whether looking at 'real' weddings or the images generated by bridal culture, an obvious connection can be drawn between the flower girl role and the bridal role in the performance of white femininity. Even just examining them superficially, the bride and the flower girl are dressed to look the same. They represent adult and child variations on a similar ideal. The ideal is a sexuality of innocence.

Culturally appropriate white femininity is therefore characterised in this sense by the notion of innocence. In bridal fashions this innocence is translated via the white cloth that presents the female body. In ancient Greek legend, the spinning of thread and the weaving of cloth is linked with femininity. The cloth is in a sense therefore indicative of a memory loss, as women who were once the producers of cloth have now become known as its consumer. As Stratton (1996, p. 34) highlights, “the capitalist system of exchange separates the commodity from the conditions of its production”. Furthermore the “gendering of the economic division of labour between (male) production and (female) consumption attenuated even further the connection between the commodity in the shop and its production history” (Stratton, 1996, p. 48).

The irony of a postmodern notion of difference as illusion lends toward a thinking that there must be an origin. Ward (1997) argues that postmodernity has not transcended the modern but rather has been committed to a re-thinking of modernity’s efforts. Whilst modernity, in Ward’s (1997) view, was focused on retracing its steps, postmodernity seeks to expose them. Perhaps a postmodern approach will be confounded on the notion of essentialism because it will not settle on a particular origin.

However, in discussing an origin that is a cultural commodity, the only notion of a ‘true’ nature is as volatile and unpredictable as its market. The uncontrollable is the modernist preoccupation, a language constructed to conceal its origins. Ward (1997, p.xxi) writes this as the “fetishisation of the literal”. Literally the fetishised commodity should be defined as much by what is hidden as what is displayed. When the flower girl is by nature a commodity, her origin is concealed. In using digital technologies, I appropriate my childhood image into a range of contexts in order to destabilise the flower girl’s origin.

Weary of exploitation associated with her origins in commodity fetishism, in the latent phase of image-production exploring the flower girl I immediately pursued the avenue of avoiding entering any new models into the economy of commodity exchange as commonly characterised in the photographic fashion model. I envisaged I would create photomontages with already existing images of flower girls. Viewing fashion photography as depicting models being entered into a ‘meat market’, I attempted to avoid responsibility for entering new meat into the market. In a conversation I had with my Honours Co-ordinator, she suggested that this is like being a vegetarian who wears a

leather jacket, so I was forced to consider where my status as a vegetarian who wears leather situated me in my artistic practice. In wearing the leather garment the vegetarian condones others' eating of meat. As such, confounded on responsible representation I attempted to avoid using the girl's face, but rather my own in my images, to avoid further exploitation and to highlight the work as a self-reflexive piece.

The bridal gown in terms of consumption of clothing makes the best analogy for a meal as it is usually only consumed once. In this sense, to wear it twice is like eating vomit. The flower girl's dress, a meal comprised of cloth, is a miniature version of the bride's dress and is also usually only worn once. As Banim, Green and Guy (2001) state, other clothes are seldom just consumed once; rather, they are used on many occasions. Clothing acts as a technology for constructing a bodily self (Mauss and Bourdieu cited in Craik, 1994) which can transcend biology. In this view, the body's agency is expressed in the cloth. Craik (1994) states that fashion is often considered a mask disguising the 'true' nature of the body or person. The essentialist idea of the 'true' nature of a person in terms of their gender has been contested by feminists claiming that differences between men and women are mainly the function of culture and not biology. However, it was essentially biology that rendered women, in culture, the producers of the essentials – children, food and cloth (Gubar, 1981). Kuryluk (1991, p.179) argues we need garments to survive, and “the rich symbolism of thread and fabric resonates in everyone because of textiles' omnipresence in swaddling clothes, garments, bedsheets, towels, blankets, (bridal) veils, (burial) shrouds, bandages....[and so on]...that provide us with comfort and pleasure”. The self can not escape its construction in clothing. The gendered self is constructed in cloth.

Barber (1994) discusses the pre-industrialisation division of labour which saw most hours of women's days spent making cloth. Whilst a major task for women was to prepare food, women wove cloth so they could simultaneously attend to childcare duties (Barber, 1994). Barber's (1994) history of cloth reveals a history of women's work devoted to making perishables. As Barber (1994) states, the product of women's labour, the cloth scarcely survives through the millennia except in tiny, hardly recognisable shreds. As the technical terms recorded by the scribes concerning the technologies of the cloth's production reveal little about women's lives, the deterioration of cloth is hence analogous with the history of its production. Exposing a

history of a cloth's production can therefore provide a way into the origins of its service in its construction of gender.

As women are now primarily associated with clothing as its consumers the cloth as produced at the hands of women is in a sense analogous with the blank page. Gubar (1981) claims the blank page is created by traditionally both female and silent acts of "sowing" flax seed and "sewing" linen. As Kuryluk (1991) argues, originally textiles were woven of organic materials. Women's cloth weaving established a sense of unity between humanity, animality and vegetation. In weaving the cloth women's hands were connected with nature. Gubar (1981) celebrates the matrilineal stories in patriarchal culture, which let us hear the voice of silence. Gubar (1981, p.260) states that "no woman is a blank page: every woman is author of the page and author of the page's author". Fashionably we continue to not only associate cloth with femininity, but celebrate this femininity in fashion. Moreover, Sawchuk (cited in Craik, 1994) attributes, among other things, the link between fashion and femaleness with explanations of capitalism that position men as producers and women as consumers.

Pre-industrially women were no doubt the producers of cloth, but post-industrially became associated with consumption (Stratton, 1996; Craik, 1994; Barber, 1994; Wolf, 1990). In tracing the cloth's origins women's disconnection from nature can therefore at least in part be attributed to capitalism. Thus it can be argued that the capitalist bride's desire for the material is the site of women's disconnection with nature. This is where the bridal fantasy fails feminists, and is ultimately self-destructive. If men are now the producers of cloth then they therefore also manufacture our femininity, and the desire for the bridal gown therefore provides no feminist liberation. This is also supported by the argument conveyed in Wolf's (1990, p. 15) *Beauty Myth* in which she asserts "since the Industrial Revolution, middle-class Western women have been controlled by ideals and stereotypes..." As such, the myth of the bridal fantasy which informs us of what is desirable for a woman is rather a counter to the liberations of feminism.

Paglia's (1992) return to nature as an attempt to resurrect the pagan goddess is as much a historical contradiction to the pursuits of feminism as Walker's (2000) desire for the dress. Like the cloth they wove, in the tradition of the wedding ceremony women themselves in pagan society were used to secure property and were a valuable exchange

commodity. In the pagan marriage the woman's status was the fundamental connection between marriage and the land (Jochens, 1995, p.21). The pagan wedding was classist, and indeed the pagan bride's beauty was still a factor informing her exchange value. If a young girl with physical flaws became engaged, the final decision would not be made until she had been given a chance to outgrow her impediments by sixteen years of age (Kuryluk, 1991). However, the pagan wedding celebrating sex and reproduction situated the flower girl as a fertility symbol. As many of the traditions still followed in performing the white wedding ceremony are of pagan origins, the flower girl apparently remains a fertility symbol in the contemporary wedding. When the bride wears a dress that celebrates the industrialisation of cloth production, the flower girl is thus rather a symbol of a fertile capitalist economy.

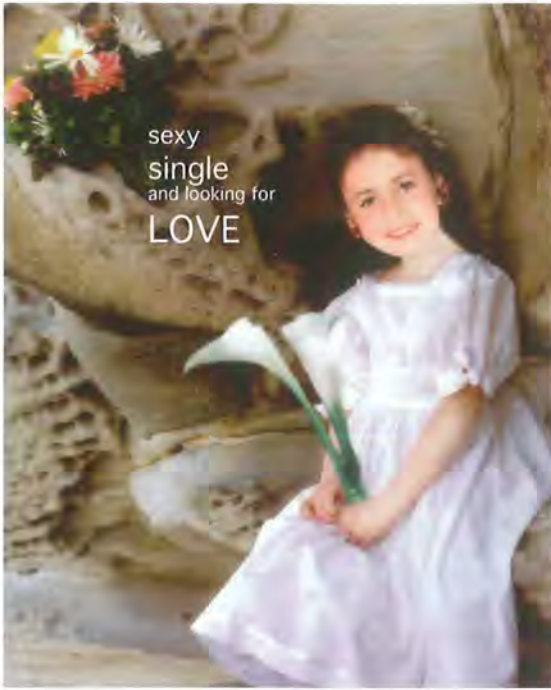
As Craik (1994, ix) puts it, "the western fashion system goes hand in hand with the exercise of power". As Kuryluk (1991) reminds us, humans are born naked, but are wrapped in cloth as soon as we emerge from our mother's bodies. Our natural bodies are covered in cloth as soon as we enter the world. Upon birth, in the West, the body is immediately clothed in capitalist symbolism, and entered into the capitalist economy. Opening any bridal magazine in a newsagency today, a white bride can be seen to feature on nearly every page. Society's fabric is so woven with the thread of the post-industrial white gown, that nowadays the actual colour of the bride's or the flower girl's dress can remain inconsequential. How can the politics of the post-industrial white gown be contested? Unless she is deluded, a bride will not simply break away from tradition by simply wearing a different colour dress. The contemporary fashion magazine's tone was set in the Victorian boom of lady's magazines, which placed happiness in marriage at the centre of women's issues (Craik, 1994).

In the tradition of the Victorian notions of the feminine, marketability still informs the contemporary bridal look. In bridal fashions, as discussed by Stevenson (1978), a young lady was considered forward and immodest for drawing attention to herself. Immodesty threatened her exchangeability. Advice in an 1870s women's magazine (cited in Stevenson 1978, p.18) urged that modesty was most evidential of purity of feeling; "it gives best assurance of happiness in a nearer connection, and gleams with the brightness of a halo around the altar of marriage". The modest halo surrounding Jesus, Mary and the Saints in Christian art is appropriated into bridal fashions to create the look of innocence. In this sense the consumer is spiritualised by the cloth to enhance

marketability. In the age of consumption religious iconography for women and girls is in the form of fashion advertising. In *The Age of Innocence* (cited in Stevenson 1978, p.18) Mrs Welland shudders to think “they might even take a photograph of my child and put it in the papers”. Mrs Welland gave me the idea to get my flower girl in the press. In order to expose her conventional role, irony is used in my work to present the innocent flower girl as sexualised in the name of ‘love’. Romantic love is the concept that fuels and yet simultaneously masks the crass commercialism at play in the white wedding ceremony. As discussed by Ingraham (1999, p.85) the ideal of love is based on the institutionalised heterosexual “coupling as the preferred manifestation of love relationships, making all other possibilities unimaginable or unacceptable”.

In the bridal fantasy enlisting the services of a flower girl, who supposedly aspires to be the bride, it naturalises the desire for the white gown. The way in which bridal magazines’ narratives accomplish the institutional naturalisation of this ideal of romantic love, as discussed by Ingraham (1999), commonly takes place as a play on words. My image *Sexy, Single and Looking for Love* is a play on words, exposing the institutionalisation of girlhood sexuality as subject to the bridal fantasy. Whilst the caption may be provocative, the issue of child sexualisation is approached in a self-reflexive way in which I have consciously sought to avoid the exploitation of young girls to make my case. Certainly, mimicking sensationalist techniques would be an avenue for their subversion. If the impact of feeling subject to sexualisation as a girl is not made clear in the formerly discussed image, certainly, in the title, *Basket Case*, I exaggerate the self-reflexivity of my artwork’s thematic content. An extra dimension is added to a reading of my work as attempting sensationalism, and is dealt with in the context of the entire series. The image of the artist when young may be viewed to stand in for an image of the artist at present. Viewing the image *Sexy, Single and Looking for Love* without the realisation that the work is autobiographical may possess a certain shock-value, especially if it were presented outside of the context of the series. By presenting the image in a series I have made it obvious on many levels that outright sensationalism was not my intention. In *Basket Case* the flower girl who sold herself to the women’s magazine capitalised on her girlhood sexuality has now ‘grown up’ and climbed the corporate ladder. Death Lilly has therefore swapped her ceremonial gown for a power suit, and it follows that her accessories must change too. Her basket has been exchanged for a designer handbag full of death lilies. The collection plate signifies her intent. Yet in *Basket Case*, Death Lilly, the rich media celebrity who has

entered the adult world of commerce ironically still has the face of an innocent girl. Even though she deemed it a necessary process of her career advancement, the grown-up flower girl presents her testimonial to being disturbed by her decision to place herself at the centre of the discussion. Death Lilly is a self-confessed “basket case”, a term I use to denote a person who is clinically and psychologically unwell. The irony of my confession in Death Lilly is that the secret of my success is a fictional tale.



Sexy, Single and Looking for Love (2006) Basket Case (2006)

I have attempted to display in my work how the flower girl’s symbolic look of innocence is fragile and fraught with challenges. Paglia (1990, p.23) states, “everything sacred and inviolable provokes profanation and violation. Every crime that *can* be committed *will* be.” A major marker of difference in determining life-stage for either gender is the way in which sexuality is experienced. There may be socially recognised differences between genders in how such initiations into adulthood occur. Indeed as discussed by Wolf (1996), a boy may become a man by having a certain kind of sexual experience with a woman. Wolf (1996) recounts the most memorable moments of her ‘becoming a woman’ during the 1960s, sharing the experience of her peers and their perspectives on their girlhood in hindsight. This work is not purely autobiographical, as the narrative unfolds it shares her own sexual experience and of others’ with whom she had close personal relationships from girlhood through to puberty through to womanhood. What Wolf (1996) reveals, however, in recounting what is convincingly a

typical progression through life, is the myth of innocent feminine sexuality as being the preferred sexuality for a desirable woman. Stratton (1996, p. 37) further reiterates, “the girl’s sexual desire is reconstructed from an active desiring to a passive desire to be desired” and this he argues coincides with the “culturing order of Western capitalist society”.

This desire to be desired is played out in the bridal fantasy in which both women and girls employ the use of clothing to dress-up the fantasy. Patricia Calefato (2004) claims that Utopia is clothed in representations. Paauwe’s (2004) photographs in the *Kindle and Swag: the Samstag Effect* exhibition, perhaps presents a utopia of an exclusive girlhood. Whilst the images are mimicry of advertising images, they are coded with the same decadent aesthetics of romanticism and eroticism: flamboyant costuming, a luscious finish, highly choreographed, highly constructed. The young girls in Paauwe’s (2004) photographic utopia have no boys to contend with. There are no boys present in the pictures, nor is there any evidence of them. There are none of their clothes. The young girls are represented in a sexual world, constructed by Paauwe (2004), existing entirely only of girls. The girls’ dresses are very clean, and the girls themselves are contained in Paauwe’s utopia. Calefato (2004) presents the photographic body, the photograph of the model, as a vessel through which to live fantasy. Since the girls’ faces in Paauwe’s photographs are hidden by hair, or the photographs are cropped below the head, the models lacking their own identities are vessels more penetrable. Since they are defaced, this sense of containment is challenged.

However, the white cloth that packages innocence, the illusory liberation of the consumer, has a history of production. In order to publicise my challenge to the bridal industry’s ideal of consumer innocence an idea for effective distribution of my photographic work is to insert my pictures into bridal magazines so that the subject who seeks to make their consumerist bridal fantasy a reality is by default exposed to Death Lilly of the underworld. This would be a technique of culture jamming. O’Shaughnessy and Stadler (2005, p. 188) state that culture jammers “use their familiarity with codes and conventions of advertising and other forms of communication to throw a spanner in the production of meaning by creating spoofs, defacing texts, and subverting intended meanings of the media texts they choose to rework”.

O'Shaughnessy and Stadler (2005) reveal culture jamming as rooted in the feminist aesthetic of art production as a 'media activism' technique. I adopt in my work a style inspired by Barbara Kruger, discussed by O'Shaughnessy and Stadler (2005, p.190) as "dealing with women's issues in complex ways". My images deal with a particular women's issue of the flower girl in the white wedding in a complex way. For example, in my image *Every Little Girl's Dream* the bride is trapped inside a quintessential white-good of the ultra-modern 1950s style refrigerator. The image is the purgatory between advertising and marriage. The flower girl is reincarnated as a crypt statue who rests on a bed of death lilies. In a symbolic suicide, the flower girl has escaped the purgatory the bride endures. In the direction the pallbearers are headed they shall bring no coffin in which to properly bury the flower girl.



Every Little Girl's Dream (2006)

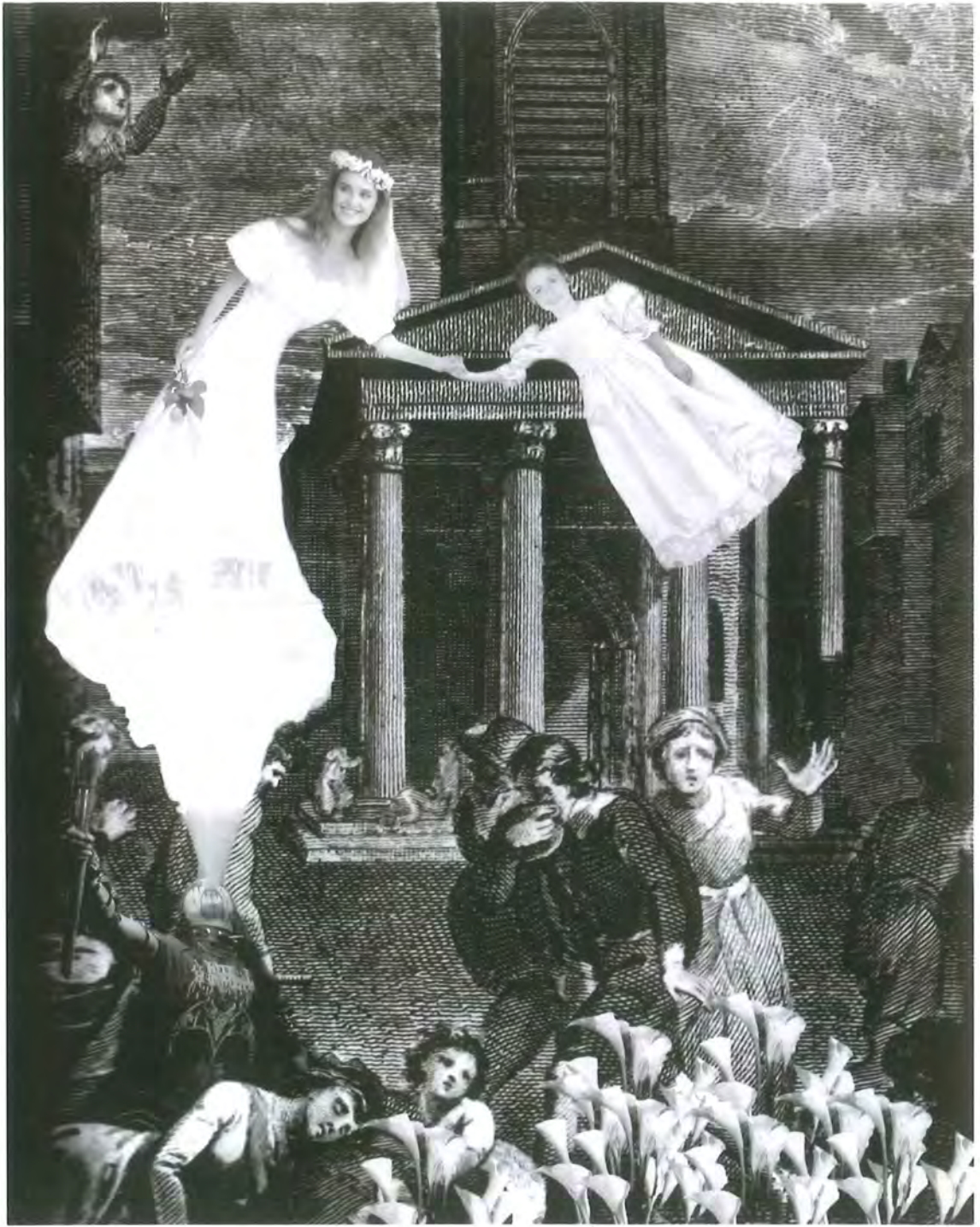
The particular cultural jamming technique I wish to employ to distribute my work is illegal, and since this is a university project, it remains as a discussion of my artistic process. Instead, I decided to work in collaboration with the university's curatorial services to hang the framed prints in a corridor of an Edith Cowan University building. Even the most subversive artistic techniques are absorbed back into institution, and since I used university facilities and resources to produce the works I see it appropriate that they be reintegrated into the environment in which they were produced. I use the

‘transitory’ exhibition space of the corridor to denote the liminal feminine space. I apply, firstly, the description ‘transitory’ to this space in its simplest sense: in that it is a corridor and not a room. In its design it is intended as a space in which people pass through, rather than to encourage people to congregate in large numbers for an extended period of time. I consider the space ‘liminal’ because it is a place visited during a journey from one destination to another. This is appropriate because the space serves as an analogy for the transience of the flower girl’s innocent femininity.

Before I exhibited my work in this space there had been artworks on the walls for a number of years, which may present a challenge to my labelling of the space as “transitory”. It was my observation that the regular visitors to the space, rarely stopped to view the works as they were already familiar with them. However, as the artist who designed the exhibition, I argue that I have the authority to call the space ‘transitory’ because in the very act of exhibiting there, the space is also ‘transitory’ in terms of an exhibition space. In additional support of my claim that the space is transitory, the Curator has verified that as a result of my initiative, the space has become an exhibition space intended for student works (Petrillo, 2007).

However, as explained in my thesis, my primary pursuit was to illuminate a discussion of girlhood which has been largely neglected by feminists. If there was a political statement made by me exhibiting my work in the university space, it was that we should examine the hierarchies within feminism which position some perspectives on life in authority over others. As feminist academics we should scrutinise ourselves as to how we may be oppressive to our juniors. We should ask: *what are the reasons for feminism’s neglect of girlhood representation?* In the earlier chapter I propose that the flower girl poses a threat to the bridal identity. This is an analogy for the threat the girlhood discussion poses to feminism. I add, this is the value of my self-reflexive approach in which I attempt to revisit earlier stages of my life. Unless the feminist movement authorises the perspectives of girls, and makes room for girls to have freedom of self-expression and self-representation, feminism will ultimately only be able to duplicate the effects that patriarchal oppression have had on women into its relationship with its young. I am not a girl but I am a feminist, and my artwork is an attempt to authorise the girl’s view.

The Hardcore Nymphette



The Plague (2006)

The cultural fetishism of the girl child as performed in the innocent flower girl persona pervades contemporary fashion like a plague, and this is referred to in my image *The Plague*. The performance of the sexuality of innocence rooted in bridal culture but also prevalent in contemporary mainstream fashion actually serves as a kind of soft pornography. Meyers (1997) claims that apparently society is becoming more and more

pornographic, and there is an overlap between images that have been designated as pornographic as opposed to erotic. Perhaps this is culture's attempt to counter the hardcore. Fantasy is fundamental to experience, including sexual experience (Meyers, 1997), and the flower girl or girl bride persona is used to live out in the imaginary an actual sexuality that is perhaps in contemporary popular culture moving toward the deviant.

The fashion world is an erogenous zone. Fashion, a site where western culture's obsession with sex is indulged, is highly political. However, this sexual world is ironically a contradiction to the wild sexuality which exists outside of the adult world of commerce and institutionalisation. Craik (1994) argues that, whilst not all clothes are fashion, they all have a relationship with stylistic conventions and fashion systems. Writers on fashion have emphasised the notion that the clothes a society wears mirror the actuality of a society (Stevenson, 1978). If fashion is symbolic of society, then society is simultaneously influenced by fashion. Neither fashion nor society truly holds its own. Fashion is therefore society's contradictions. The flower girl is a major contradiction in contemporary Western fashion. I define the 'white wedding' as a marriage ceremony which takes place in the form of a pseudo-Christian fashion parade which celebrates the cloth in its capitalist consumption.

The pseudo-Christian white wedding is a typical wedding ceremony in contemporary Australian culture. When a "true bride's" ultimate wedding partner is a wedding budget planner, and the average expenditure on Australian weddings is around \$25 000, then clearly the white-wedding celebrates money, and the economically privileged bride's access to it (Truebride Budget Planner, 2006). Thus, this can be associated with commodity fetishism in which display of 'wealth' or spending capability is of central importance. Stratton (1996, p.31), drawing upon Marx, asserts that commodity fetishism "describes the experience in which the commodity hides the process of its own production". This can be related to the wedding ceremony in which the commodity's aesthetic appearance and its "spectacularisation serves to enhance its exchange-value" (Stratton, 1996, p.34).

However, I refuse to 'celebrate' the ostentatiousness of the ceremony when the average spending on a wedding in Australia is at least more than twice the average yearly earnings I have had since being economically independent from my parents. A darker

side is that even if “real” incomes in Australia are now three times what they were in the 1950s, most Australians still believe they cannot afford to buy everything they need, and even so “there is no strong link between rising consumption and rising well-being” (Hamilton cited in Deniss, 2004). Money does not make us healthy. There is a ridiculous irony in the symbol of appropriate or ‘healthy’ white bourgeois femininity which is legitimised by flaunting a bridal gown costing on average \$1600 (Truebride Budget Planner, 2006). The price of the bride’s gown is symbolic.

I argue that the bridal fantasy, which is a contemporary phenomenon of hysterical consumerist delusion, is not liberating for women and is oppressive to young girls. Aside from the obvious environmental costs deriving from any out-of-control spending spree, the bridal fantasy is a loaded weapon against women’s, and especially girls’ liberation from patriarchal oppression. As Wolf (1991) argues, the unconscious hallucination that is the beauty myth grows ever more pervasive and influential due to a conscious market manipulation of the beauty industry, including cosmetics, cosmetic surgery and pornography industries. Whilst pointing to the fact that women are the most influential group of consumers within this industry, women are simultaneously the most influenced. Fashion is part of the beauty myth, since it too manipulates its market through the construction of fantasy and tactics to draw consumers in through this fantasy.

Whilst rich white women are theoretically more able to make the fantasy of bridal beauty a reality by racking it up to their heart’s content, the poor and children can only be excluded or exploited. As Kurth-Schai (1997, p.193) states, “the image of children as hope for the future is shared across cultures, the experience of childhood as a time of innocence, security, self-worth, and contribution to family and community is a distant fantasy for most children”. This is certainly a contemporary Western understanding of childhood. Therefore, the flower girl as an image of the future of consumerist indulgence in mass-produced fashions assumes responsibility but does not enjoy the democratic rewards as she usually has no spending capability of her own. As Kurth-Schai (1997, p.197) puts it, “children, stripped of their agency, become pawns of the political system rather than advocates on their own behalf”. The bridal fantasy hence, uses the flower girl to serve and promote the capitalist agenda. Whilst simultaneously informing young girls that the value of their social contribution resides in their

appearance, the flower girl is arguably prepared to be in adulthood an advocate for her own childhood exploitation.

The bridal fantasy as it is experienced in the desire to consume bridal products posits it within a fashion industry and therefore within the broader beauty industry. What kind of economic future can young girls hope for if all they want is to be beautiful? MacInnis and Mello (2001) state that hope is a marketable entity, affecting the economic viability of many industries. MacInnis and Mello (2001) attribute the multi-billion dollar “beauty” industry alone to the viability of cosmetics companies, pharmaceuticals, perfume companies, plastic surgeons, department stores, drug stores, salons, spas, beauty parlours, magazines and books. MacInnis and Mello (2001, p.3) recognise magazines and books as sources of hope, “promoting “secrets”, “tools”, “tips” and “tricks” to better looks, a more alluring body, improved romantic relationships, and enhanced self-esteem.” Hence, young girls, in the hope to be beautiful are susceptible to advertorial advice generated by the beauty myth that is the bridal fantasy.

For example, in the children’s book *Beany and the Dreaded Wedding* (Wojciechowski, 2000), Beany, thoughtfully preparing herself to perform the role of the flower girl as her cousin Amy’s wedding, hopes she does not have to wear the dress her friend who has already been a flower girl wore because she thinks it is ugly. This represents the hope little girls have to be beautiful. The dress Beany ends up wearing for the wedding is made in a collaborative process because Amy asks Beany to draw a picture of the kind of dress she would like to wear to the wedding (Wojciechowski, 2000). The dress is designed and made especially to suit Beany’s own ideas of what makes a beautiful dress (Wojciechowski, 2000). However, while Beany’s personal sense of success in her feminine role is still measured in terms of beauty, perhaps the collaborative process is less oppressive.

Walkerline (1999, p.18) convincingly argues that culture carries adult fantasies and creates vehicles for them. It is typically a role of the visual arts to depict social concerns and observations about life. The ephemeral nature of girlhood as a stage in life is not a new observation. In a highly controversial scene in *Frankenstein* (1931) a moment is shared between Frankenstein, and a little girl who carries flowers: a ‘flower girl’, ends in her drowning. Carol Gilligan and her colleagues (in Hirsch, 1997) find girls themselves use symbols of drowning, (and also violent rupture and death), to describe

the transition between childhood and adolescence, adolescence marking the end of childhood.

Valerie Walkerdine (1999) discusses the way popular culture infiltrates the innocent world of childhood using a common example of a girl imitating a woman singing a song dressed as a teenager. In her discussion of the change in discursive space for the 'Little Lolita', Walkerdine (1999, p.12) states, "she shifts in this move from innocent to sexual, from virgin to whore, from child to little woman, from good to bad". Walkerdine (1999, p.12) argues that the "little seductress is a complex phenomenon, which carries adult sexual desire but which hooks in the equally complex fantasies carried by the little girl herself" (1999, p.18). Furthermore, concerns about protecting the child are actually more of a defence against the acknowledgement of dangerous desires on the part of adults (Walkerdine, 1999, p.18). The flower girl persona reverses the change in the Little Lolita's discursive space, and in occupying this space the flower girl becomes also a 'little seductress'.

The prank death of girlhood sexualisation is flaunted in recent fashion photography. For example, there is the case of US *Zink* (2006) of a young 'Lolita', a covergirl where the photograph featured a young teen model in a black veil with a flower detail. This exemplifies the fashion world's shift from marketing the sexualised girl toward promoting a marketable sexualisation of girlhood innocence. The trend the fashion industry is experiencing is a spectacularisation and therefore a sexualisation of girlhood innocence. The 'ethereal' and 'transient' sexual innocence is spectacularised by the flower girl's performance in the wedding. When youth is a major component of the beauty myth, and industry exploits the characteristics of the innocent girl to sell to women and girls certain products, clearly the 'sex thing' has not had its day. When in popular culture women are girls, girlhood becomes even more 'transient' and 'ethereal'.

Elements of bridal costume have been absorbed into the broader fashion industry and the flower girl's sexuality of innocence hung upon teen models like Gemma Ward, and the army of her clones. Since the flower girl's sexuality of innocence is more convincing than the bride's, given her childlike characteristics Gemma Ward's look is more analogous with a flower girl than a bride. When 'stalking' Gemma Ward on the web, pictures can be found of the childlike model in a range of stylisations employing the constructed tactics of the innocent sexuality fantasy in the tradition of Calvin Klein

campaigns (supermodels.nl, 2006). I use the term ‘stalking’ to suggest the active pursuit of this ‘nymphette’, which implies a cultural fetishism toward the childlike woman, which became a prevalent part of western culture since the late 19th Century (Stratton, 1996).

Conducting a Google search of Australian websites for “Gemma Ward” obtains some 1600 hits. Also noteworthy is that there are almost 300 000 sites referencing Gemma worldwide. The first hit asks: “How did Gemma Ward go from Australian schoolgirl to A-list cover girl so quickly?” (Lawson, 2004, ¶1). According to Lawson (2004, ¶1), Gemma’s “got that inexplicable thing and the fashion world is besotted”. Furthermore, the trend is spreading. While the Perth model sees it as “the sincerest form of flattery”, apparently it’s breaking news that “clones of Australian uber-model Gemma Ward are hitting the catwalks, as designers carbon-copy the Perth teenager’s wide-eyed allure” (Bita, 2006, p.1). Those calling the shots, which often means taking the shots, on what is so appealing about the innocent and childlike look of Gemma Ward attempt to explain the supposedly “inexplicable” (Lawson, 2004). Fashion photographer Nick Knight (cited in Lawson, 2004, ¶35) calls her look ethereal, stating that “fashion is built on transience”. Fashion editor of a popular US magazine *Tatler*, Anna Bromilow (cited in Lawson, 2004, ¶34) states “there’s a real trend for this doll-like look, a childish look, with a look of knowing behind it. It reflects childishness as well in fashion. The sex thing has had its day”.

I assert that the ‘sex thing’ the fashion world has symbolically denounced clearly *has not* had its day! When woman’s biology renders her not only more economically affected but also more symbolically responsible, the childishness promoted in fashion is blatantly and socially oppressive to women, and even more so to young girls. In contrast to Paglia’s (1990) claim that feminism has exceeded its proper mission for gender equality, Wolf’s (1991) discussion of *The Beauty Myth* convincingly demonstrates how women are not free or equal, and women do not have true power over our representation. In its mass-marketed exploitation of girlhood innocence fashion as a system is highly political. However, there is nothing innocent about the currently prevalent campaign of the flower girl persona spreading through mainstream fashion, relentlessly marketing an ideal of social agency for women equivalent to a young girl’s.

I argue the flower girl's role is essentially a vehicle for a bridal fantasy, a consumerist fantasy of girlhood sexual innocence. I argue that representations of the flower girl in this role are therefore exploitations of her perceived appropriate sexuality, and are therefore not representative of her actual sexuality, or the hidden underworld that Massey (cited in Rowe and Lindsey, 2003) claims is repressed in normative white femininity.

Carol Mavor (1996) has endeavoured to address two basic points about the sexuality of girlhood. In investigating 'Lewis Carroll's Photographs of Little Girls', Mavor (1996) recognises children's sexuality as complex, and secondly their sexuality should be treated with such recognition, and with respect and scrutiny. In keeping with Paglia's (1990) essentialist stance, sexuality is inherent. Mavor (1996) was clearly then, concerned with the questioning of what should be considered responsible, and therefore ethical, representation of children's, and in her case study, specifically girls' sexuality in photographs.

As a feminist practitioner a long time conscious of the subjective gaze on the girl's body, my work has explored ethical representation of girls' sexuality:

Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world (Berger, 1985, p.9).

As we are led to believe by the bridal fantasy, both the patriarchal and matriarchal eye enjoys the look of the young girl. The 'innocence' of girlhood as a cultural fetish is spectacularised and commodified. Womanhood obsessed with beauty follows suit. Feminist attempts to move away from the definition of feminine beauty as young has left Kathy Meyers (1997) asking, more or less, where does the gaze go to next if women have control of our representation and choose to de-eroticise ourselves? Meyers (1997) suggests children become the objects of erotic desires. The flower girl may be innocent in her dissociation from adult commerce, yet in her cultural performance she signifies an area of female consumption in a capitalist world (Allmark, 2005). Women as consumers have a certain degree of power over representation and our eroticisation, yet we denounce our liberation to maintain the beauty myth that is the bridal fantasy, and its inherent service to patriarchy. Our matrilineal adherence to sacred women's traditions circulates a meaning of the cloth in which the production of meaning is generated in a

consumptive process of existing meaning. As such, “the realm of ideas and fantasy has now been commodified and integrated into a totalising capitalist system which is driven by consumption” (Stratton, 1996, p.15). In performing the flower girl role in the age of consumption, I have attempted to subvert the consumption of the look of the innocent girl as commodity by exposing the look of her production. In doing so I have given rise to an imaginary in which feminine meaning can be inscribed into a symbolic object, such as the white cloth symbolising normative white-girl femininity, which exists outside of the contemporary sacred ritual that is its consumptive process in the lead-up to the white wedding. Just as there are many threads that weave a cloth, there are many ways in which the threads can be woven. The reason contemporary fashion’s *white-bride-who-is-really-a-flower-girl* is so significant in terms of the major contradiction to the pursuits of feminism is that the wedding ceremony from which she originates celebrates an economic system which oppresses women. The problem of celebrating women’s independence as access to money, in a fashionable white cloth that symbolises innocence and youth, is that young girls in reality are economically dependent.

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