

Reflections on the Works of Participating Artists Choosing My Religion

Jemima & Dolly Brown

Jemima & Dolly Brown's body of work has always referenced and given attention to an idea of duality or the nature of "the self". More frequently, these works, produced by Jemima and her avatar other half, Dolly, refer to questions of what makes an individual complete or what makes a complete individual.

Sometimes this is seen in the performative acts of giving a physical form to the intangible "other" such as in the existence of Dolly herself. But it can also be seen in the use of a crypto-scientific gathering of evidence, for example in the way moulds have been cast from real family member's bodies. These are then dissected and reconstituted in works in hybrid forms. Always there is an ever-present exploration of identity and its boundaries, be they scientific, social or metaphysical.

For understandable reasons, the work is often considered in relation to certain western cultural belief structures and their image cultures. Obviously the practice conjures up the deranged "science" of Romanticism; Jemima & Dolly the disturbing Dr Frankenstein's let loose on a pastoral English family. But most often the work is linked with the main religion of the 20th century; the cult of Psychoanalysis and all its credos about the nature of "the self".

Perhaps, however, a more neglected reading is to understand the relation between the work and a much longer tradition of Dualist belief structures within European culture. In literature and historical studies, the re-examining of European Gnosticism and, more dramatically, the suppression of Cathar cults has gained much attention in recent decades, a recent reminder of the long tradition of dualist creeds. And, from further back, the legend of Pygmalion, perhaps one of the oldest narratives trying to describe and understand the difference between the tangible and the intangible being; between the living flesh and the idea of the living flesh, is one that not only re-emerged in the 19th century, but reasserted its box office clout as a Hollywood classic in the 20th century.

The line linking these ideas and myths to the exploration of the nature of "the self" in Jemima and Dolly Brown's work is strong, both in form and content. And, indeed, it grows ever more complex. The aspect of individual identity and its relationship with time has already been seen. For example, she has used images of her parents captured in a different time as a starting point for works. Now, in the most recent work, the "Steal Her Style" pieces, it is heavily foregrounded.

In this work Jemima literally works from professional images of her grandmother, an actress, taken in the 1940's and images of actresses and supermodels grabbed from the Internet. Chronology blurs as Sigourney Weaver and Audrey Hepburn share the screen. Jemima and Dolly's presence mingles with that of her ancestor as well as with icons and celebrities. The effect is a jarring "dis-identity", perhaps at its most jarring at the points where we readily accept the moving eyes (Jemima's own) in these static images as somehow normal. Like Pygmalion or even a blessed Russian icon, the static lives in some way.

Jasmina Fekovic

There is a strong sense that, until her latest work in which she herself appears on screen, Jasmina is an invisible character in her documentary films. Often taking a clear documentary approach -for example, a real person as a subject- she subsequently plays with and challenges expectations. These might be expectations about the relationship between certain aesthetics and certain genres of film, expectations about what is actually being "documented" and perhaps most characteristic to her work, expectations about personality itself; where she ends and an icon begins.

In the process of documenting these individuals, a spiritual or personal belief element is always present somewhere. In some cases, these overlap with recognisable beliefs, for example, a certain "New Age" understanding of personal philosophies in the subject of the film. In other cases, these larger metaphysical questions, like Jasmina, never come into clear focus but seem to swirl around the edges of the frame.

In the case of "Goddess", however, religious mythology is an overt starting point for a work that weaves found footage of Maya Deren with footage filmed on Cyprus. The location – the mythical birthplace of Aphrodite – is contrasted with that island's more recent history. Women, iconic and real, seem to struggle to retain the dominance of love in a world in which civil war and strife have been forcefully present in more recent times. Perhaps the central tenet of the film owes as much to "Lysistrata" as it does to an immediate political position.

The body of work of Jasmina Fekovic has hinted at the intersections of a personal philosophy of existence and identity against a backdrop of social and cultural – including religious – values and beliefs; a kind of existentialism in which the existence of something bigger than humanity is almost implored.

In her most recent work, "Dadelpalm", a film and performance/installation made together with Maarten Claeyssens, this has a new forceful presence. Both in the film – in which she and Claeyssens both appear on screen – and in the installation, actions and objects apparently indicating spiritual actions and quests are present. We are offered a gruelling, real-time action in the film that evokes the meditative exercises of Kundalini yoga and a quite environment in which domestic objects co-exist with ceremonial lamps and a tent in Tibetan white. If we strain to take a closer look at what appear to be spiritual objects, we see that things are not as obvious as they first appear. Thus, we notice that what seems to be white Tibetan prayer banners are, in fact, a pair of high fashion printed hose by Bernhard Wilhelm. In this example alone, the paradox is registered. Jasmina Fekovic, consumes both the high-status designer world of Antwerp where she lives and paths to spiritual enlightenment.

Iris van Dongen

Iris van Dongen primarily produces large-scale drawings, usually coloured with pencil, gouache, charcoal or pastels. Lone figures of women within a moody, apparently threatening environment are a recurrent, almost obsessive feature of her work. Her melancholic, somehow distant women occupy worlds of darkness, fire and potential demonic possession. In single works, camp

gothic romanticism competes for space on the paper with an expressionistic pain or even cheap sub-cultural metaphor and kitsch imagery.

And so it should. For, her work is a type of research into visual culture that seeks to find the bridges between the easily-dismissed expressions of contemporary subcultures and the way in which preceding, predominantly 19th century, art movements sought to negotiate weighty issues such as mortality, spirituality and the metaphysical. For example, it is easy to see in work, either through the use of emblematic items (such as clothing logos) or in the entire visual sensibility, an immediate evocation of the Gothic, post-punk subculture. It is at once excruciatingly naïve and an honest expression of age-old turbulent soul-searching. It manages to be both unsophisticated and an expression of a heightened state of consciousness. Similarly, her female figures can be simultaneously portraiture and an indication of her insight into the very questions that portraiture raises in a contemporary context: how can we give an accurate portrait of who we are once we have insight into the many possible ways in which our image of ourselves is shaped by external socio-cultural forces?

Yet, with all of this awareness, she attempts to find the path that is directly, honestly expressive, yet self-aware. Not surprisingly, her female figures are often called "mythological". Certainly, the sources on which she appears to be drawing such as Romanticism and Pre-Raphaelitism, shared a similar fascination with the mythic. However, movements such as Pre-Raphaelitism often used specific religious or mythological narratives to explore the desire to return making what its proponents believed was a more spiritually alive art. But in the work of Iris van Dongen, the narratives remain more vague, nameless stories that, nonetheless, present a construction of visual information that taps into the communal database. We understand clearly the kinds of metaphysical angst and spiritual dichotomies that swirl around her female figures. Like her, we understand that it might be naïve, even silly, to face such questions in an apparently rational, scientific age, particularly if they draw on the residual religious beliefs of our culture. Yet, the very fact that we recognise the indicators of spiritual and religious beliefs

in her work is a testimony to how deeply engrained they are. And how connected they are with specific visual languages.

We are asked to reconsider the assumptions that certain popular cultures – for example, the Goth subculture- has adopted certain visual languages merely for their shock value or as tools for teenage rebellion. Could it be that, in fact, there is a connection between their visual culture and much older longings to grapple with profundity?

In one sense, if Iris van Dongen's work is not a direct statement of religious belief in an age when religious belief becomes less the norm, then it is a statement about the human psyche's need for something like religious belief and a visual language to describe that need.

Risk Hazekamp

Risk Hazekamp uses photography and video to explore issues of identity and in particular, the way in which gender and personal identity intersect. It examines both the passive expectations of the viewer and the active choices on the part of the artist to manipulate or change the relationship between gender and social identity in one's own personal identity. Many works feature her, quite literally, altering her personal identity through representation.

On the most immediate visible level, her work explores the construction of social and personal gender identities by evoking and drawing upon mass media and popular visual language, for example advertising and Hollywood movie genres. Her lone figures, often set in landscapes, evoke narratives of explorers, cowboys and rebels, her female physiological gender often jarring the viewer into a state of awareness of how such identities are constructed. But, if one pushes further beneath the surface of the works, it is possible to see how they – consciously or unconsciously- relate to far older visual narratives and depictions linked with older mythical representations.

One need think of the way that generation after generation of European artists and, perhaps more significantly, those in the 19th century, have turned their gaze back on the classical world. The depictions of goddesses from the classical Greek and Roman pantheons were often interesting sources of

reflection on gender. If Aphrodite, not surprisingly, proved a disturbingly popular choice for male artists to both impose their formulations of gender and conduct legitimised discussions about sexuality, then the women of the classical pantheon who jarred against type, such as Diana, could perhaps offer more complex exploration. Images of Aphrodite – and later in Christian cultural depictions of the Virgin Mary- could always be definitive about the nature of female identity; an answer. Goddesses like Diana, with her 'odd' combination of 'female' body and 'male' interests and powers demanded a representation outside of the normative social definitions of gender roles; a question.

That various feminist movements should look to classical goddesses like Diana – or her apparent equivalents in other pre-Christian cultures- as being a ripe mascot for 'reclaiming' seems fairly obvious with hindsight. However, it's also worth remembering that popularisation in the 20th century of such 'reclaiming' movements also testifies to the endurance of these myths and their depictions. That 20th century women could see in these ancient mythologies the possibility of a set of new identity options highlights the ways in which these very old narratives, in all their simplicity, could stand for change, for a question still awaiting an answer.

The lone adventurers of Risk Hazekamp's work map fluidly onto depictions of the lone woman hunter, free in the landscape to pursue her own pleasures, carve her own path; evoke Diana the Hunter as much as the Marlboro Man.

If scratching the surface of one series of work possibly reveals an ancient, mythical layer, other works may reveal them too. A series of works on bullfighters reminds us of the strange blood rituals we still act out, complete with flamboyant ritualistic clothing. Perhaps if we look at it again, we recognise the lineage to ancient Cretan bull-vaulting ceremonies or the gender-specific bonding rituals of the Roman worship of Mithras, a particularly popular option with the all-male Roman army. Again, mythical layers in which gender and identity narratives are deeply linked.

And, in the most recent work certainly the overt tangling with gender issues is present in the images of bearded women. However, if the trail to the classical, pre-Christian myths appears to have gone cold in this new work, then perhaps a whole new area has opened up. Much has been written about the androgynous nature of depictions of Christ in European art over hundreds of years. Often ascribed to a desire to encapsulate both male and female qualities in the figure of Christ, perhaps it's not that unusual then that some of the recent work seems to have a strangely familiar quality

Pepijn van den Nieuwendijk

Pepijn van den Nieuwendijk is fascinated and inspired by a broad range of historic visual cultural artefacts ranging from Mexican "Day of the Dead" traditions to antique magazine illustration and 19th century Catholic funeral memorial cards. He combines these interests with his love of Dutch and other European painting traditions to produce works that at once reflect the antique and the contemporary.

The works "Salve Marine" and "Porkus Inquisition/Red Planet" are examples of works in which the Catholic popular cultural imagery from both Europe and Latin America is overt. The unique combination of content and style is often jarring: two high ecclesiastic yet non-human characters ride on a carefully rendered vehicle that, on close inspection, appears straight out of "Star Wars"; a Madonna devoid of flesh seems to survey us from a world in which Frida Kahlo's nightmares and Dutch painting traditions hold equal weight.

The combination of the content and painting style manage to evoke a dense, not easily transparent social satire that share a certain enjoyment of a deeply personal humour with some of the less restrained works of "Neue Sachlichkeit" painters. There are ways in which these works share mood and humour with some of the works of Dix, Grosz, Schlichter or Uzarski. However, here, the more easily read social comment gives way to a more personal world in which comment, if any, is less clear. But, there is a continued interest in organised religion as a point of bemusement and even fascination: if the complex and elaborate decorative arts used by the established church are somewhat

bizarre and funny, they remain nonetheless impressive and perhaps even awe-inspiring.

Angie Reed

Angie Reed's practice is based in combining the works she makes as a visual artist - primarily drawings and animations that are installed in situ as a form of installation- with the works she produces as a musician, writer and performer. As with her previous performance work "The Barbara Brockhaus Show", her complex new performance piece will combine a body of work of drawings, film and animations that both extend and illustrate the songs that she has written for this work, "XYZ Frequency".

"XYZ Frequency" draws on a vast range of musical styles and stories as sources of inspiration. At the heart of the complex work is the tenet that Angie, the performer (as a result of accidental electrocution) becomes, literally, the mouthpiece for a range of disembodied souls who have hitherto been unable to express themselves to an audience.

The metaphysical aspects of the work are strongly visible, taking in a wry view of both New Age and more traditional beliefs, all from Angie's perspective as a woman raised as an Italian-American catholic. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the apocryphal story of an expelled lesbian nun who, during the economic madness of the Weimar years, ended up as a gutter-celebrity courtesan and notorious sexual libertine of the decadent demimondes of Europe.

Eventually a version of this work will culminate in its presentation within the performance work she is currently preparing. However, the imagery narrating this particular story has already been presented by Angie in a number of ways; first as a drawing and series of lyrics in the Netherlands and, more recently at Kunstbank, Berlin where it evolved into an installation involving an animation shown within a traditional nun's cloak. The form of the work forced any potential viewer onto his or her knees in order to see the animation; a physical double entendre. Obviously, the position echoes the traditional position for prayer but, given the narrated details of what this particular nun got up to, perhaps it echoes other physical positions in which she found herself

Oddly, questions were raised about the "appropriateness" of the work given that Angie's monographic exhibition coincided with the early days of the new Pope's reign.

Ari Versluis & Ellie Uyttenbroek

In the massive, ongoing project, "Exactitudes", Ari & Ellie document and represent social visual types. In what Ellie calls her "butterfly collection", the duo scan public spaces to spot and engage individuals to sit for what will eventually become a multi-window, large-scale photograph.

A locus of the work has often been identified as exploring the intrinsic problems with the widely held notion particularly in the world of documentary photography practice- that "the street" in somehow more authentic. Lovingly and with much humanity, Ari and Ellie's work coaxes out the way in which the whole world, not only fashion magazines, are subject to a stylist's eye. In their work there is very much a dialogue between their stylist eyes and those of the sitters; dedicated amateur stylists of their own street identity.

A number of works from the series document or make evident the relationships between cultural-religious identity and "street" identity. In some works, such as "Allah's Girls" the way in which a cohort of Rotterdam teenage girls negotiate a "street" identity that both expresses their adherence to an organised religion and their desires as fashion-conscious young women living in a vibrant Dutch city is plain to see. In others, such as "Ghoulies" and "Ghoulie Boys" the results reveals the way in which certain subcultures have taken traditional religious imagery in order to subvert those values and construct a new, recognisable identity immediately associated with its own traditions of belief.

In the case of "Ghoulies" the typology is immediately recognisable in a western cultural context. Teenage Goths, death-metalers and "dark" subcultures continue to attract new recruits to their legion. Their look promises a way of ritualistically cladding oneself in a shroud of apparent rebellion, social off-centeredness and difficult listening music. And yet, beneath the supposed opposition to traditional values, there is a mechanism that reinforces very old and traditional western beliefs. Least of all, the dark Gothic view of traditional Christian beliefs demonstrates that for a readily

recognised group, a subculture, the persistence of these Christian beliefs hold an important psychological attraction. Perhaps they act as a starting point for social and family rebellion or journeys into the more esoteric fringes of the occult and satanic. But ultimately, these are only made possible by the persistence of the central Christian narratives.

The work of Ari & Ellie is not a statement of a personal religious position on the part of the artists. However they are, most definitely, acutely and intuitively aware of how such beliefs and their narratives are harnessed by groups of people to forge their street identity, whether in support of or in opposition to these traditional cultural-religious identities.

Marga Weimans

Marga Weimans is a fashion designer from Rotterdam who recently completed studies at the prestigious fashion department of the Antwerp Royal Academy of Fine Arts. Not surprisingly given that institution, her work holds its own under the rigorous expectations of fashion as both high-skill craft and as a conceptual process contributing to visual culture.

Her existing body of work has involved an unusual and creative combination of sources. Combining imagery from European fashion history (and more specifically "dandyism" within that broad topic), nature, African dress forms and Rotterdam black street cultures, the work develops a discourse that traces the connections between these apparently disparate topics into a cohesive and beautiful whole. Perhaps even more significant is that, therein, the work also elaborates the often-neglected black Dutch experience. There is one level on which the work can be taken as a visual mediation, in form and meaning of materials, on the experience of African Diaspora.

Religious belief or perhaps more accurately, spirituality, runs through much of the work. On one level it is visible in an obvious understanding that clothing has in contributing to the belief rituals of a culture, or indeed, a subculture. A vast mantle with pronounced shoulder fins and hood at once references ceremonial dress from various cultures, least of all Japanese. Yet, closer inspection shows that this gown owes as much its heritage to the glossy robes of

boxers, a sport that has long been associated with both the potential for success for oppressed black men and thus, an assembly point for disembodied black immigrant cultures.

But, spirituality goes deeper than merely referencing the aesthetics of ritual. In the performance she recently made for the Wereld van Witte de With Festival (Rotterdam), Marga presented highlights from her body of work in the context of live music, film, text and an invitation to the audience to interact with the tableau vivant.

A structured spirituality was very much in evidence in the live music provided by a gospel choir -in fact the gospel choir with which her father is associated- and the listed use of the organ from Antwerp Cathedral for the music especially composed for the piece. The presence of Marga in the performance and film, coupled with the specific selection of texts, all alluded to a more personal spiritual path of self-awareness and growth. In both content and form, the piece gave attention to her notion of producing couture as being both a process and end point for a personal spiritual journey. The result of the whole is one that appears to be a very personal, yet is communicated more broadly. It conveyed a strong understanding of the roles that a strong spiritual life has played in providing individual and group support and guidance for immigrant communities.