Darren Tofts

**All changed, changed utterly:**
a terrible beauty
is born.
W.B. Yeats

Tableau. Art and design magazines piled upon books on medieval armoury, anatomy, animal portraiture, Doré’s *Dante*. A surgical handbook reveals a garish colour plate depicting the procedure for suturing a gashed thumb. Above the fireplace a box of puppet heads perch uneasily alongside various plastic doll’s limbs. A spray of papers, floppy disks and cigarette ash camouflage a computer scanner. The detritus of the streets and remnants of industrial process. Cracked hubcaps, a fragment of chrome that used to be a bumper bar, a disfigured rusting tin can, crushed, like the pineapple it once contained. If you were making a techno-gothic version of *The Thousand and One Nights*, this would be Aladdin’s cave.

These *disjecta membra* are the raw materials which form the basis of the strange disturbing yet compellingly beautiful images of the Melbourne-based New Zealander, Murray McKeich. I often visited this space of metal and acephalic dolls in the late 1990s when we were working on *Memory Trade*. I never watched him work on an image, but always marveled at the unseen alchemy that transformed his found objects into such sublimely monstrous chimeras. McKeich’s aesthetic in *Memory Trade* was a recombinant one, an exploration of extremes, the convergence of humans with machines. As an assembler of parts, a melding of flesh and metal, of human form and machinic process, McKeich has given us a remarkable body of work that confronts the impact of our accelerated fusion with technology – a poetic, defamiliarised meditation on the culture of the cyborg.

Look again at this scene. There is something uncanny about it, something strangely familiar. It resembles a flea market, a place in which one might stumble upon something marvelous. French writers and artists looked for the marvelous in the Marchés aux Puces at Clignancourt and Saint-Ouen in Paris. Writers such as Isidore-Lucien Ducasse, the Comte de Lautréamont, looked for the strange beauty that can only be found in the unexpected coupling of incongruous things, such as “the chance encounter, on an operating table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella”. McKeich’s scrounger’s zeal situates him in the Surrealist tradition and its pursuit of la *marveilleux* in the remaineder objects of everyday life. His work is fascinating in its intriguing echoes of Surrealism as an attitude to the imagination that attempts to capture the delirious rapture and ecstatic double vision that lurks within the fabric of the banal, the mundane and the everyday. His approach to image making is resonant of photographers such as Man Ray, for whom the external reality of juxtaposed objects trouvé was the basis of a sur-reality, a liberated way of seeing inspired by the vertiginous free association of ideas. Man Ray exploited this fascination with the physicality of the object in his rayographs (also called photograms) by placing objects directly on to photographic materials prior to exposure (rather like placing an object on a scanner). It has been suggested that the magical results of such a process were brought about by the compromising of the object’s physicality, its disappearance into abstraction as “the revelation of an unknown universe.” In contrast to this, McKeich’s treatment of the scanned object intensifies its corporeality; the glistening, membranous quality of entrails is heightened through the manipulation of light and texture using filters. His images have such a kinaesthetic force that his grafted gothic assemblages are rendered too tactile for comfort.

The artist who most dramatically comes to mind in the context of the art of discomfiture is Hans Bellmer. His *La Poupée* (*The Doll*) series of 1936 is a graphic perverse depiction of misogynous sexual violence in the manner of de Sade. These images are all the more disturbing as carefully staged photographs of a female mannequin that has actually been manipulated disfigured and, in its own way, brutalised. But for all their bruised and contorted articulated joints, Bellmer’s dolls are a photographic rather than sculptural entity and in this sense forcefully “exploit photography’s bond with the real, presenting fictions as reality.” Dolls, or parts of dolls (usually heads and limbs), are a recurring motif in Surrealist photography (and other media, for that matter). Subjected to pressure or violence, they may or may not be spared the kind of savage treatment meted out to Bellmer’s contorted dummy, or the ‘sex dolls’ of Cindy Sherman’s violent eponymous series from the early 1990s.

The manipulation and arrangement in space, including virtual space, of puppet heads and torsos is critical to the photograph as a set-up staged event typical of Bellmer and Sherman. Another artist who comes to mind in this respect,
also in the lineage of surrealism, is Pierre Molinier (if you overlook the fact that he was excommunicated by André Breton in 1965). In the 1960s Molinier turned from painting to photomontage, in which he explored, in detailed documentary fashion, his inclinations towards transexuality autoerotism and perversion. In Molinier we find an iconic sense of the surreality of an image, in which the ordinary is made incomprehensible and the incomprehensible ordinary. Molinier’s methods of assembling an image, often incorporating photographs of other photographs, are suggestive of McKeigh’s practice of combining scanned photographs and other images as well as objects:

The process begins with the photographic self-representation of the already masked androgynous figure. The picture derived from this process is then, either in part or as a whole, altered with other partial or whole photographs of models and/or other imagined psychosexual partners; they include pictures of portraits, female nudes, transsexuals and dolls, as well as fragments of dolls such as joints, thighs, breasts, trunks, or an already made-up head.

The techniques of layering and masking most frequently used by McKeigh are akin to Molinier’s process of building up the various textural components and facets of his photomontages. Frederick Sommer, the Italian-born photographer who made Arizona his home, also took great care to craft a scene or image out of objects, which he would then photograph. Sommer too produced images that were at once disturbing and exquisite, such as his chicken pictures of the late 1930s. Influenced by Max Ernst, Sommer’s affinities with surrealism are also apparent, specifically in his defamiliarising of the ordinary. “With Sommer,” it has been suggested, “we enter the world of the incredible and somebody locks the Doors of Perception behind us.” However, while surrealist photomontage is a tradition into which McKeigh’s work can be situated, it doesn’t fully account for his reliance on the photographic image as something to be appropriated into a more complex process of assemblage and transformation.

Look at this mess. There’s something attractive, even picturesque about its disorder and clutter. It’s very photogenic. It actually brings to mind a photograph, a photograph by Peter Beard of a famously messy studio in South Kensington, the studio of Francis Bacon. Conspicuous among the ossified piles of rags and newspapers that litter the floor are the myriad photographs of Bacon’s models (George Dyer, Henrietta Moraes, Lucien Freud), various books on photography or pages torn from them depicting African wildlife, birds of prey and the omnipresent Muybridge studies of motion. Almost without exception Bacon preferred to work from photographs and drew on them as “triggers of ideas” as much as points of reference. Bacon’s attraction to the use of
photographs is their “slight remove from fact, which returns (him) onto the fact more violently”. As a problematic presence, which delivers not the object but a memory of it, the photograph suited Bacon’s sense of the painted image as a memory of the violent mystery of appearance. Wanting at all costs to avoid illustration, his paintings were concentrations of this violence, the violence of appearance in conflict with illustration. His images are traces of the absent human presence, smeared on the canvas as a snail leaves its slime. It was this viscosity that Bacon attempted to capture on the canvas and for him photographs were prompts, irritations, means of unlocking the ‘values of feeling’.

McKeigh’s use of photographs is very similar to this in that the image he crafts is more than a bricolage of images and objects. The process of scanning an object and scanning an image breaks down the ontological field between a thing and its representation. With image manipulation software, meat and photograph of meat are just so many pixels. This homogenisation of information allows for the subtle and seamless mutations of flesh into metal that we find in his work: the generation of hybrid anthropomorphic forms. If the Surrealists looked for the marvelous in the external world of objects, McKeigh’s grotesques, often beginning as photographs, insinuate themselves back into the external world by looking like objects that have just been photographed before the slime has dried.

Francis Bacon is one of the few influences on his work that McKeigh has acknowledged (another is the sixteenth century Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldi, whose work was reclaimed from infamy by the Surrealists). He remembers the impression Bacon’s work had on him at an early age and in particular his 1962 triptych Three Studies for a Crucifixion. (Bacon likened the inverted screaming figure in the right hand panel of this work to Cimabue’s thirteenth century Crucifixion, describing it as “a worm crawling down the cross.”) Bacon’s images of solitary figures, trapped within their hermetic railed enclosures, are striking in their lack of context. Space in Bacon’s portraits is vague and undefined, yet oppressive in its foregrounding of the figure. McKeigh’s work is distinctively monochromatic. It is inappropriate to speak of background or foreground, as there is nothing to signal perspective or frame co-ordinates. The image, stripped of any context other than the presence of its own facticity, is all the more claustrophobic for its lack of distractions. The opening sequence of David Lynch’s The Elephant Man is another text memorable for its evocation of a frightening spatial nowhere. Another is Dora Maar’s 1936 Portrait of Ubu, which is one of the great icons of surrealist photography.

As an assembler of parts into new hybrid forms, McKeigh’s work could justifiably be called grotesque. It possesses the iconic quality of the genre that George
Santayana called 'the suggestively monstrous'. The Renaissance taste for this decorative style of mixing of animal human and vegetable forms (notably in the work of Arcimboldi) came about at a time of tremendous technical revolution in the visual arts. The impact that digital technologies have had on the creative process is comparable in that it has introduced new potential for invention and innovation. In particular, it has introduced new techniques of assemblage and reconstitution that serve an artistic sensibility like McKeigh's very well. He is a kind of magus who disintegrates and reconstructs forms into fantastic hybrids, the natural or technological origins of which are indeterminate. His work is all about change transformation and mutation. Like Bacon's work, it has the power to unsettle and disgust. But work so extreme also possesses its own kind of beauty, an irresistible terrible beauty that Bacon and the surrealist enfant terrible, Georges Bataille found in the slaughterhouse. McKeigh doesn't need anything as sacral as the abattoir or the butcher shop window. The imagination is strange and compelling enough.


Notes
1 Memory Trade: A Prehistory of Cyberculture Craftsman House 1998
3 Ibid p159
4 Peter Jensen 'The Artist's Desiring Gaze on Objects of Fetishism' in Pierre Moliner (exhibition catalogue) Plug In Editions, Winnipeg 1999 p46
5 Ibid p46
7 Francis Bacon in D. Sylvester The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon Thames and Hudson 1990 p20
8 Ibid p20
9 Ibid p17
10 For a discussion of McKeigh's work in the context of the digital photograph, see Damon Tofts 'Untractable Enigma: Notes Towards A New Morphology of the Image' in Parallax: Essays on Art, Culture and Technology Interface Books, Sydney 1999
11 Sylvester op.cit p14