



UNCOVERED

Hidden Pleasures of the Day

Ghasan Saaid
Maria Fernanda Cardoso
Joanne Saad

Blacktown Arts Centre

Exhibition Acknowledgements

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Blacktown Arts Centre is proud to present an exhibition by three contemporary artists with connections and relationships with Blacktown through living and working in the city. In their own unique ways, their individual art practices explore notions of the commonplace and everyday experience, often overlooked or left uncovered or unrevealed. They each share a passion and love for intricacy and complexity in the image, in what at first sight might seem common and obvious.

UNCOVERED is a collection of creative responses and philosophical enquiries into the nature of pleasure, in particular visual pleasure. It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. Freud considered that looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as there is pleasure in being looked at. As an advanced representation system, art poses questions of the ways the unconscious structures ways of seeing, and pleasure in looking, and how these are ultimately transferred to the viewer. Simultaneously, and in contradiction, we might take pleasure in looking itself and in identifying with the image seen.

The artists in *UNCOVERED* find pleasure in unusual and surprising places. For Joanne Saad it is in the plethora of personal stories of Blacktown residents and how these hidden narratives shift between public and private places. For Ghasan Saaid it is through inversion of the spaces we might encounter everyday: sky, water and the liminal zones between land and sea. And for Maria Fernanda Cardoso it is in the diversity of plant genitalia and reproductive foreplay of flowers. In each scenario, they delight and share their pleasure with us in revealing the extraordinary in everyday places and experiences, in making the familiar strange and enjoyable.

Blacktown Arts Centre would like to thank the artists for their challenging yet seductive series of artworks and their commitment to the *UNCOVERED* exhibition and public program at the Arts Centre, to Pedro de Almeida for his catalogue essay that explores artists' critical responses to everyday experiences that might otherwise go unnoticed, and to Kon Gouriotis OAM for opening the exhibition.

Paul Howard
Curator Visual Arts

Cover image
Aproximadamente quinientos esposos,
esposas desconocidas,
2013 digital print, 45 x 30 cm

A Handful of World

Now the world is known to be uncommonly various, which can be verified at any time by taking a handful of world and looking at it closely.

— Franz Kafka

Taking a handful of world, as Kafka would have us do, to examine it closely is perhaps the most succinct description of what lies at the heart of the artist's task since the game-changing advent of modernity. If the ancients had their epic, civilisation-defining, decade-long *Odyssey*, whose truths speak to eternity, then the moderns had their *Ulysses* and its compression of the dulled minutiae and schizophrenic sensations of modern life into a single day. And yet we, the recent descendants of the moderns, may fairly claim that we have been short-changed, feeling that we have even less than a day as our base-level duration of contemplation, such is the light-speed acceleration of our sense of time in the digitised twenty-first century. When we speak of the 'everyday' in art we refer not just to a practical or aesthetic decision to focus on the

common objects and experiences of life as subjects worthy of serious attention and appraisal, but more importantly we make a decisive moral stance that elevates the 'everyday' individual – no god nor king nor conqueror – to equal status. Thus Leopold Bloom becomes a mythical figure like Odysseus, one who has no choice but to accept the enduring fact that familiarity breeds a carelessness that reverts to ignorance as we overlook that which we think we already know. The artist sees this rule as erroneous in the first instance, made to be broken in the second. It takes an attentive, modest artist – a poet, a painter, a photographer, it hardly matters – to resurrect the moments of sensorial pleasure that die in an instant with each passing moment of every revolution of the Earth on its axis. To this end, *UNCOVERED: Hidden Pleasures of the Day* at Blacktown Arts Centre presents work by three artists, Maria Fernanda Cardoso, Joanne Saad and Ghasan Saaid, that shares a commitment to prolonged, close inspection borne of a desire to witness, record and transform the wonders that otherwise pass unnoticed in everyday experience.

Joanne Saad's new work *Remembering*, commissioned and produced especially for this exhibition, is concerned with the complex relationship of perceptual sensation between artist and subject and the bodily manifestation of memory. Over the course of several months Saad approached a diverse range of Blacktown residents with a challenging proposition: to allow themselves to be filmed as they intentionally recalled certain personal memories at the prompting of the artist who remains unseen and unheard off camera. To arrive at this point Saad first engaged with her subjects, conversing with them about their life and specifically about moments in their past that have resonance for each individual in private recollection. This ranged from moments of joy as well as sadness, distant and

recent, distinct and half forgotten. The generosity of spirit and unelaborated honesty offered by the artist's subjects is testament to Saad's reciprocation of these qualities that have been a defining aspect of her artistic practice over the past two decades. Presented here as a two-channel video installation that comprises a series of filmed portraits of people who purposefully remain anonymous to the viewer, Saad's *Remembering* is a consolidation of her working principle that genuine communion between people has no purchase without the letting go of fear and the bridging of mutual trust.

As someone who evolved as an artist by first exploring the photographic medium, Joanne Saad regards her video work as a natural extension of her still images. In her series of silent film portraits, reality is not simply mediated but proposed anew by the moving image in an attempt to consciously comprehend the infinite modulations and meanings of the human visage in real time. For Saad the full-face portrait is the prime visual vehicle for entrance into the psychological realm. To gaze upon this work is an act of reciprocity between seeing and being; a complex dynamic of observation, appearance and response, an inspired muddle, a sort of wrestling with experience rather than a standing back from it or an extended and unlimited transformation of it. This process is further complicated by its continuation into the relationship between image and viewer. For an artist such as Saad the content of a picture is located not in a pre-determined view of the world, nor in a specific aesthetic criteria for a finished picture. It is first and last in the creation of the picture itself. Unless the double sensation – of looking and being – is fused, no picture results, nothing comes. For in this kind of method there is no alternative to fall back on, no theory of how the picture should work, no program, no quantifiable profit or loss in personal

transactions. In such gestures there is an uneasy playing out of sublimation and repression that heightens our awareness of the subject's emerging conscious recollection of memories as their object of attention and the true subject of Saad's work.

Between artifice and rationality Joanne Saad shows us how there can exist a psychological space cleaved by the uncanniness of human response, unfamiliar and unsettling in its parameters and something that is most concentrated in the face, the site which gives formal portraiture of this nature, in still or moving image, its lingering presence of familiarity and desire. In this way *Remembering* enacts a perpetual process of recreation and identification whose dynamic is complex and contradictory such that there forever remains a series of unmitigated variables. In *Camera Lucida* (1981), destined to remain the most poetic discussion of photography – precisely for its basis in personal memory as the author recalls via photographic prompts memories of his dead mother – Roland Barthes described this dynamic as 'a field of closed forces ... where in front of the lens I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art'. When speaking of the human face on film we're concerned, then, not just with the projections of the eye but also that of the mind, of which memory is a primary driving force. The matter is complicated by the vast possibilities of idiosyncratic interpretation, encompassing the many points along the circumference that links a glimpse into an individual's psychological forcefulness with the presentation of a mask whose illusion is moulded by its cultural signs. This is perhaps why on some occasions Saad 'pulls back' from the face to show us her subjects in various settings, either in the

streets of Blacktown or in the intimate spaces of their homes, revealing that behind suburban bricks and mortar – just as behind the human visage – is a space furnished by relics of intimate significance and meaning, which are themselves personifications of desire and thus an archaeology of memory.

A fascination with the surface of things and the phenomenological implications of point-of-view is also at the heart of Ghasan Saaid's new suite of video installations created for *UNCOVERED*. In his work *Fifth Corner*, one enters a darkened space to encounter a waist-high wall of bricks, rather like a rectangular well in a desolate landscape, that when advanced upon reveals at its depths moving images of clouds against a deep blue sky. Peer in closely, pause and breathe; you might see the passing of a bird or airplane like scurrying insects on the surface of a pond. With the heavens inverted, Saaid creates a vertiginous sensation that has the reverse effect of Joanne Saad's work: he disembodies point-of-view by inflating an artificial construct of perspective. Similarly, in *Zero Gravity*, Saaid extends this disorientating effect by creating an installation that presents an upside down world. Installed on the ceiling is a three-dimensional figure that hovers spectre-like in contemplation of a moving image of clouds out of reach above the viewer's eyeline, thus inverting the logic of gravitational attraction. In this work Saaid illustrates the principle of the reverse image created when funnelled through a convex lens as in the inside of a human eye or the dark chamber of a camera, further heightening the body's separateness from the mind when it comes to fields of visual perception. In their strict adherence to their nominal object of study both installations recall Constable's *Cloud Studies* of the 1820s, an early example of realism's groping toward a more scientific mode of

observing natural phenomena, an art historical genealogy leading to the present day that Saaid hints at with the gilded timber framing of a digital screen.

Narrowing his focus on another earthly element, Ghasan Saaid's *Theory of Blue Sea*, extends his study of natural phenomena by working with computer-generated graphics to enhance a still photograph of the gentle waves of an unknown sea. Projected on the gallery ceiling with a manipulated soundtrack, this work is closely linked with the series of photographs that accompany his suite of works in *UNCOVERED*, depicting impossible juxtapositions of objects seemingly floating in a fantastical space between fore-, mid- and background in two-dimensional picture planes. In *Foreign Force*, for instance, we encounter a large boulder floating above a chasm created by the opposing concrete banks of a harbour side sea wall. Using the possibilities of digital technology, Saaid has manipulated the formal elements of light and shade, perspective, proportion and balance to embed a visual uncanniness into the spatial rulebook of this artificial world. Saaid's interest in the phenomenological limits of sensory perception is a primary concern in the work, one that revels in the introduction of 'foreign forces' that might rupture the viewer's otherwise tightly stretched logic of spatial coordination across a picture plane. The perceived distance between the boulder, as it impossibly hovers in mid-air above the surface of the water below, is the elastic space in which the artist seeks to imprison the logic of sensation.

Taking as her highly specialist interest the reproductive organs of insects and flora is Columbian-born artist Maria Fernanda Cardoso. Her burgeoning collection of works in her self-created *Museum of Copulatory Organs* are, if not quite surreal in their relationship to the

world due to their invisibility to the naked human eye and therefore their different order of visual uncanniness, sculptural and photographic creations based on the magnified penis of flea, fly and spider alike. Assembled for examination with an obsessive museum registrar's precision they are at once a sober, artistically informed process of scientific observation and classification and a celebration – not without its humour, it must be said – of the bizarre forms that can be found in the natural world. Cardoso's penises (or penes) are trophies that truly reward sustained commitment to close inspection. If every form has its function then gazing at Cardoso's discoveries – fantastic assemblages of microscopic bits and bobs – one genuinely marvels at how copulation is even possible with such unaccommodating, intricate and sometimes threatening forms.

Presented at Blacktown Arts Centre is a new collection of colour photographs of flower stamens and carpels and deeper magnifications of the strange matter of pollens. Photographed against a deep, seemingly limitless black background, the flower genitalia 'pop' like brightly coloured lollies of a fantastical maker, like floral versions of the child-like wonders of Willy Wonka and his factory. Salivation is nearest the first involuntary reaction, soon followed by a pleasing slouch into a languid delight as their visual seduction takes hold. As sexual organs they are undeniably more attractive than humanity's – or those of insects for that matter – and Cardoso's crisp portraits of stamen and carpels are so charming as to make one almost forget that they represent the unfulfilled potential of sperm. Collectively they prompt a whole new awareness of the almost invisible act of pollination that goes on around you in your daily life as you pass through fields and landscapes. A notable art historical antecedent to Maria Fernanda Cardoso's project is the

German photographer Karl Blossfeldt's extensive and unique collection of photographs of plants, which he published under the title *Urformen der Kunst* (Art Forms in Nature) in 1928 to instant acclaim. Manipulating microscopic lenses, many which he himself constructed especially for his object of study, Blossfeldt was able to photograph the extraordinary details of plant life – leaf structures, the artfully designed and textured surfaces of grasses, seed pods and the erotically-charged stamens of flowers – to reveal their strange beauty and complexity. Concurrent with Blossfeldt's discovery of this world in miniature, was the flourishing intellectual development of quantum mechanics which defined the twentieth-century's capacity for the unleashing of nature's forces beyond perceptual comprehension – not for nothing was physicist Werner Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle' so called. Indeed, the philosopher Walter Benjamin declared that Blossfeldt had '*played his part in that great examination of the inventory of perception, which will have an unforeseeable effect on our conception of the world.*' A century on Cardoso has worked hard to formulate her own body of knowledge that she has thankfully recorded for posterity in her doctoral thesis, *The Aesthetics of Reproductive Morphology* which is a testament to the artist's burning curiosity. Only human hubris and an incurious complacency can deny the seductiveness of the secrets of what she has brought to light.

Pedro de Almeida is a curator, writer and Program Manager at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney.



*Tres novias, un novio y dos
esposos en una flor de novios,
2014, digital print, 60 x 50cm*



*Naked Flower # 1: One wife, three husbands,
2013, digital print, 45 x 30 cm*

List of Artworks

Ghasan Saaid

Fifth Corner,
2014, Hebel blocks, single channel video
projection, sound

Theory of Blue Sea,
2014, single channel video projection,
sound

Zero Gravity,
2014, mannequin, framed LCD TV,
single channel video, silent

Foreign Force,
2014, digital print 76 x 100 cm

Cloud Performance,
2014, digital print 76 x 100 cm

Transit,
2014, digital print 76 x 100 cm

Joanne Saad

Remembering,
2014, multi-channel video projection,
silent, 20 minutes

Maria Fernanda Cardoso

Siete Cueros Desnudo
(*Naked Princess Flower*)
2014, digital print on paper, acrylic
face mounted on aluminium backing,
90.5 x 104cm

*Tres novias, un novio y dos
esposos en una flor de novi*
(*Three brides, one groom, and
two husbands in a 'groom' flower*)
2014, digital print on paper, 2mm acrylic
face mounted on 2mm aluminium
backing, 60 x 50cm

Una novia y cuatro novios se van a casar
(*A bride and four grooms are going to marry*)
2014, digital print on paper, acrylic face
mounted on aluminium backing,
90.5 x 25.5cm

*Novios y novias se van a casar en
una flor de Hibiscus roja*
(*Grooms and brides are going to
marry on a red Hibiscus flower*)
2014, digital print on paper, 2mm acrylic
face mounted on 2mm aluminium
backing, 60 x 40cm

Pollen is Male
2013, nylon, wooden base, metal,
dimensions variable

Naked Flower # 1: One wife, three husbands
2013, digital print on paper, acrylic face
mounted on aluminium backing, 45 x 30 cm

Naked Flower # 11: One wife, six husbands
2013, digital print on paper, acrylic face
mounted on aluminium backing, 45 x 30 cm

Naked Flower # 6: One wife, five husbands
2013, digital print on paper, acrylic face
mounted on aluminium backing, 45 x 30 cm

Naked Flower # 5: One wife, six husbands
2013, digital print on paper, acrylic face
mounted on aluminium backing, 45 x 30 cm

Naked Flower # 2: One wife, nine husbands
2013, digital print on paper, acrylic face
mounted on aluminium backing, 45 x 30 cm

All artworks courtesy
and © the artists 2014.

Maria Fernanda Cardoso artworks
courtesy William Wright Artists Projects.

Artist Statement

Maria Fernanda Cardoso

Naked Flora

In collaboration with Ross Rudesch Harley

The flowers' leaves... serve as bridal beds which the Creator has so gloriously arranged, adorned with such noble bed curtains, and perfumed with so many soft scents that the bridegroom with his bride might there celebrate their nuptials with so much the greater solemnity.

— Carl Linnaeus, *Praeludia Sponsaliorum Plantarum* (1729)

According to Carl Linnaeus – the father of taxonomy, in his text about the wedding of plants, or plants ‘foreplay’, the *Praeludia Sponsaliorum Plantarum* (1729), the petals in a flower are the bridal beds and the calyx is the wedding chamber. By counting how many stamens (or “men in a marriage”) and how many pistils (or “wives”), he invented the Sexual System for the classification of plants, the *Systema Naturae* (1735), still in use today.

“Monoandria: A man in a marriage. Diandria: Two men in the same marriage”, and so on, until “Polyandria: Twenty men or more in the same bridal chamber with one and the same woman.”

For this exhibition I have ‘undressed’ a variety of flowers, counted how many “wives and husbands” each have, and then proceeded to photograph them ‘naked’. This series is the newest addition to the collection of the Museum of Copulatory Organs (MoCO), presented at the Biennale of Sydney 2012.

*Novios y novias se van a casar
en una flor de Hibiscus roja,
2014, digital print, 60 x 40cm*



