

SARAH SCOUT PRESENTS

ANIMAL | Cate Consandine and Stephen Garrett

In their collaborative 2011 exhibition *The Missing*, held at Conical, Melbourne, Cate Consandine and Stephen Garrett transformed the gallery into a potent *mise en scene*. A black glass wall, neon light, rubber and glass objects and a wall slashed by the jagged cut of a chainsaw disrupted, fetishised and eroticised the space. Here, the scene was evacuated, a pre- or post- event space in which bodies and flesh and situations were implied, not rendered. There was an uncanny sense that the space had been both sealed and ripped apart.

Over a decade later, the works Consandine and Garrett present together in *ANIMAL* also enact a theatrical space, a space of encounter. Pairing *Viraginis*, Consandine's exemplary bronze sculpture with Garrett's highly detailed photographic imagery from his series *Peribat*, this time, the bodies are here with us. They perform. They inhabit and create scenes. It's an audacious encounter; desiring, beautiful, decadent and visceral.

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Viraginis is a bronze sculpture with a surface so highly polished it appears to be liquid. Its form is a spectacular depiction of the lower half of a female dancer's body, perhaps slightly larger than life, and hanging in space before us as if she had just leapt up into the ballet position of *sauté second*. To achieve this position, the legs are stood apart, the feet turned out to the side. Then, there is a bending of the legs into plie, which straighten as the dancer propels themselves from the floor. The legs are taut, the arch of the foot curls inwards, the body is elevated into the air.

Yes, this is a ballet pose, but ballet's formal accoutrements have been stripped away. All is the female body; its skin, its muscle and its flesh, but only from the waist down. The elegant movement of the outstretched arms of this pose are absent, highlighting the muscular tension and torsion required of the core, legs, and feet to achieve it. Encountering the work in the gallery, the mound and cut of the pubis meets our eye, but this is only part of the bodily assertions this sculpture imposes: we witness and are compelled by the bony structure and arc of each foot; the muscular, outstretched legs. The dancer's feet, in particular, are riveting; their specific strength, composition and contortion usually hidden in pointe shoes.

This is not the first time Consandine has brought forth and unsettled the ballerina's body. In the video installation *Cut Colony (whip)* 2012, a naked female dancer in an Australian desert landscape spins and spins in a fouetté, her leg thrown straight out to the side and back to the knee like the cracking and withdrawing of a whip. Like *Viraginis*, this dancer is forever-strong, the loop of the video allowing her to perform endless tension and release. *Viraginis* also enacts her own irregular rotation, slowly turning in response to small movements of air in the gallery space.

The suspension and elevation that both these female bodies are held in give opportunity for us to think through our own fleshy vessels and how we inhabit them. In the presence of *Viraginis* and *Cut Colony (whip)*, I felt my muscles tense and straightened my back, as if drawing myself up to meet their assertion. There is also a kind of psychological reckoning here. The endless work of muscles in tension, never relaxed, is both powerful and anxious. *Viraginis* is a warrior woman. An assertion. A space held. A rising up. A bracing.

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In *Peribat*, there are also warriors. In *Faucium (Throat Throttle Choke)*, two reared-up stallions are depicted. One horse lunges at the other's throat. Veins bulge, manes fly up. There is broken flesh. The moment captured is that in which the horse under attack loses its footing, and is on its way to hitting the ground. It's a violent encounter that recalls the sinuous, entwined stallions in *Arab Horse Fighting in a Stable*, an 1860 painting by French Romantic Eugène Delacroix. In Delacroix's scene, the stallions' handlers also rise up, lurching towards the fray in the confines of the animals' stable, their muscular bodies made slight against the majesty of the entangled horses. In *Faucium*, however, the sinuous aggression of the horse is played out not in a stable but inside a glistening Venetian *palazzo*. The stallions duel underneath a domed ceiling with glass chandeliers, as sun leaks through elaborately draped windows. We can almost hear the shocking clatter of their hooves on the shiny, geometrically-tiled floor.

Garrett's foregrounding of the stallions' fight – an activity played out during mating season, and for territory – gives them an equivalence to his naked male protagonists in other works from the series, who populate rooms in equally sumptuous *palazzi* – at turns lounging, or engaging in sexual encounters.

Like Consandine's taut sculpted body, the clashing horses imbue *Peribat* with a particular psychological tension. Their glistening, active bodies rage into being. Their aggression, released without the human qualities of contemplation or reserve, transgresses the luminous interior. And not just that. In *Albedo (He Pissed Himself Clean)*, another sharply-rendered Venetian interior, we see a white male horse pissing hard onto the terrazzo floor. If *Viraginis'* power is rendered through tightly-held muscles drawn up, and outward, *Peribat* asserts the power of abandonment and release.

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Viraginis: warrior woman, whose position is infinitely, strongly held. *Peribat*: to vanish, perish, be absorbed, pine away or disappear. The Latin titles of these works connect the present to a language that is also an origin story – the language of the Romans; the base of the tree from which Romance languages grew and evolved. An Ecclesiastical language. But it is also dead language, no longer spoken. A relic, a silence. A melange of other cultural histories meld into, or are alluded to by the form of these works. *Viraginis* shares qualities with mannerist sculpture, the post-Renaissance movement that elongated and exaggerated its subjects and delighted in an active instability rather than grounded regularity. And *Peribat*, in its beautiful, explicit rendering of sexual expression beyond the cis het male, is aligned to the intent and sensibility of the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, a classicist who asserted that "if I photograph a flower or a cock, I'm not doing anything different."ⁱ

We know that ballet, too, has a long history, its origin story situated in the courts of the Italian Renaissance and Louis XIV and which has positioned women in a resolutely patriarchal space, while requiring of them extreme physical expertise. As Consandine showed us in *Cut Colony*, ballet also sits uncomfortably in a colonial context such as ours, a priapic assertion imported from western Europe. Yet, we could say that *Viraginis* inhabits but also surpasses her ballet-origins. Alongside the fever-dream of *Peribat*, whose imagery is at once highly convincing and utterly surreal, *Viraginis* could be a descendent of the *machinenmensch* in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* or a prototype for *Ex Machina's* humanoid AI.

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Despite their assertiveness, their explicit encounter with bodies, these works are also a surfeit of surface, which also enacts a kind of dissolving. Their technical virtuosity – exquisitely detailed, unique

archival prints on Hahnemülle 100% cotton paper; highly polished cast bronze – give them an air of indisputability, a veracity that asserts believability, mastery, fearlessness and lack of compromise.

We have already noted that *Viraginis'* polished form gives the illusion of liquid metal, a 'moving' surface that also resolves into an exquisitely rendered, taut form. We might describe this as high presence; the simultaneous dissolving and forming gives the sculpture an extreme singularity, and emphasises the torsion of the muscular exertion it represents. It is also a molten-mirror, reflecting, conflating and distorting its surroundings and other any other bodies in the room.

Meanwhile, the scenes represented in *Peribat* move from painstaking detail and clarity to heavily veiled and diffuse surfaces. The notion of reflection follows us throughout. In *Antrum (Pedicare)*, sex between a group of young men takes place amid a profusely-Rocaille interior, the centrepiece of which is a large mirror. The floor of *Albedo (He Pissed Himself Clean)* is stencilled with clear, bright sunlight through windows, which also illuminates the horse's white hair.

Captured in, and framed by, de-silvered antique mirrors, the veiled images in the series feel like encounters viewed through unfocussed eyes opening from sleep, or through a narcotic haze. It's liquid-y and immersive, like the floating figure in Andre Serrano's 1987 *Piss Christ*. Trails of light and crumbling patination traverse this muffled space, beyond which male figures engage in erotic acts which are pragmatically described by their titles. From *Lotium (Mirror I, Piss—Kiss)* to *Irrumate (Mirror III, Blow)* to *Pugnus (Mirror II, Self—Fist)* we see a gradual concealing of the figures, until all is surface and stain. Then we reach *In Speculum (Mirror IV)*, the only colour image in the series. Here, the stallions return, viewed through a sepia-toned, drip-stained surface. There are no tiled floors here, just the tussle and the drip. Surface and action.

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But let's pull back, into the broader *mise en scene* that is *ANIMAL*, which in its fulsomeness asserts what we might describe as a base refinement, where 'high' culture, decadent aspirations and technical virtuosity rub up against bodies laid bare, acting on muscle memory, untrammelled desire, or rage. *ANIMAL* brings us to the desiring and desired body, but delivered through the most pristine, refined container. And in doing so, it might provoke us to consider our own desiring bodies and ever-dissolving and reforming selves.

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ⁱ Robert Mapplethorpe, quoted by Germano Celant in *Mapplethorpe, Electa*, Milano, Italy, p42.