

PAUL KNIGHT

born Sydney, 1976.

Paul Knight's work is predominantly photographic but also incorporates objects, sound and video. Recurrent ideas central to Knight's practice are the nature of relationships that exist between people and more locally, the way in which people relate with themselves and their immediate environment.

Exhibitions this year include, *Show me your world*; Gitte Weise, Berlin, Germany, *Interim show*; Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow, Scotland and *New acquisitions*; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

Previous solo shows include, *Host*, Neon Parc, Melbourne, *Paul Knight*; The Third Gallery Aya, Osaka Japan, *Don't be something strong*; Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, *Photographs*; Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne. Previous group shows include, *Dangerous Beauty*; Palazzo delle Arti, Naples, Italy and the Chelsea Art Museum, New York, America, *Photography: perfect for every occasion*; Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, and *Light Sensitive*; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Paul Knight was a resident studio artist at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces 2002–2004. He was commissioned to produce work for the Australian pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2006 and is currently studying at the Glasgow School of Art on an Anne and Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship.

Paul Knight is represented by Neon Parc, Melbourne.



LOVE IN A COLD CLIMATE

JULIANA ENGBERG

Francesca da Rimini and Paulo Malatesta's sensuous marble-carved carnality laid open to the lingering gaze offered by Rodin's *The Kiss*; sheet-hooded heads entwined and mutually suffocated as imagined in Magritte's *Lovers*; the cosy sorority of tousled hair in the drab Parisian brothels of Degas and Toulouse Lautrec; the saliva and sweat of Nan Goldin's mutually absorbed friends.

There are many kinds of lovers in art. But few are as autopsically delivered as those by Paul Knight. Knight converts the potentially erotic into a clinical, snap-frozen arrangement of bodies surprisingly devoid of the usual frisson that makes a heart pump. His photographs of couples – remotely, robotically, clicked while engaging in sex – have, at first sight, more to do with formalist issues than sensuality.

But Knight's mutually consenting couples are complicated beyond their immediate appearance. They carry the weight of all lovers before and in front of them. They acknowledge the history of the visual reproduction of sex as part of an exchange that segues between the private and public, and the pleurably erotic and the perniciously exploitative.

In the late 1970s, American feminist, Andrea Dworkin famously laid out the manifesto against the exploitation and victimisation of women in the pornographic enterprise. Quick to defend the right of adults to engage with erotica, Australian author Beatrice Faust pleaded civil liberty. Perhaps, when it comes to titillation, one woman's meat is another women's poison, so to speak. I remember meeting Dworkin and her co-petitioners on the streets of New York once. Their anti-pornography campaign was supported by the cover of a men's magazine that depicted a women's body being put through a butcher's mincer. Ugly stuff. Not what Faust had in mind, I suspect, when she argued the case of freedom to look and engage.

Paul Knight's works are more culturally sophisticated as a result of these earlier debates and discussions that were waged some three or so decades ago. They have an almost didactic quality about them. In fact, I would say one of the outstanding achievements of Knight's work is his ability to find a way to produce images of sex that obtain a kind of forensic quality. These works are evidence of sex. Documents of sex. Images to be read and examined for clues as to their raison d'être.

Knight has produced works that deliberately equivocate between the choice of sexuality: he pictures two couples, one heterosexual, and the other male homosexual. In his works, men are physically exposed, but are not exploited because of the shared sexual pleasuring. The couples blend into each other in ways that produce visual conundra; again no evidence of

exploitation, only of deep mutuality. To me it seems that Knight is picturing love in the cold climate of culture. Love under the glare of judgement.

Knight's decision to photograph his figures at slightly larger than life size gives them a type of architectural monumentalism. The artist's attention to presenting his contrapted bodies in a muted tonality suggests a sculptural interest, as if flesh, sheets and pillows are crafted from varieties of crisp stone. For all that, it is almost as if Knight is reversing the process of sculptors such as Rodin, for whom the excavation of believable and sensuous life from rock was primary.

But nevertheless Rodin lurks in Knight's approach. His figures, rapt and strangely unavailable to the viewer, remind me of the figures that Rodin modeled as part of the ensemble of carnal humanity for his *La Porte de l'Enfer*. Rodin's figures contort and dissolve themselves in rapture, in much the same way as Knight's figures, absorbed in each other, exclude the viewer from anything but the surface of sex.

It is to Knight's sculptural works that one turns for confirmation of roundness. However, his co-joined figures, crafted from the bottom half of two bodies placed genital to genital, seem suspended and unearthly. Viewed from the front they are hollowed out forms – one and the same body – but vulnerable, almost brittle. This plinth sculpture is a precarious sexual fragment, a surreal disembodiment, an interruptus.

Most curious are Knight's umbilical sculptures. Odd totems of molded cement fondue that are sliced and distributed. Relics, perhaps, of the original flesh and blood symbiosis that haunts all relationships: that original object of sexual symbolic significance according to Freud, and the link that must be broken in quest of adult love. Knight casts his umbilical fragments about within the exhibition space in ways that are dangerous and subject to hurt.

Linking all – photographs, lower torsos and umbilicus – is a low knocking sound that holds the space. The faint metronome of a beat. Regular and measured, it quietly asserts its power over the room. A steadying influence. An anti-panic strategy that merges dismembered things together.

Because of their arresting visual quality, undoubtedly Knight's photographic images will be the first items in this complex ensemble of sexual contemplations to grab the attention of the viewer. Yet, it is the works en masse and their concert of meanings that require our consideration.



