

ON BEAUTY:

Works by Elisabeth Kruger

We are blown away by the vigorous insistent vegetal beauty, the luxuriant growth and delicate blushing blooms of Elisabeth Kruger's world. Strong stems push into the foreground, the volumes of these dun limbs solid and full, structuring the canvas and anchoring it with deliberate energy. These are the stems that drive the flowers, above, around, below, in a cascade of purple blooms. Wisteria has been bred for beauty over centuries; we choose to overlook that the plant is strong enough to break houses. Kruger's paintings are extravagant with beauty and, like the wisteria, their beauty belies their strength. Whether the nominal subject is wisteria, Kruger's much celebrated roses or earthy root vegetables, these paintings reach beyond the sensual into the most serious of questions. The force that drives these paintings is a steady contemplation of our relationship with the environment where the garden is both subject and metaphor.

Looking back at *The Last of the Cool Skies* 1988, Kruger's winning entry to the prestigious Moët et Chandon Art Fellowship Prize, it is apparent that this small painting represented both a breakthrough in national profile and a turning point. *The Last of the*

Cool Skies speaks to the cultural wealth of a vanishing painterly genre, but it also offers a last glimpse of the cool skies of the normative landscape in a time of global warming. It is an elegantly phrased question—where to from here? Nature and culture are brought together but do they connect only as opposite sides of the same coin? As we have become aware of our landscape's vulnerability, the landscape tradition is increasingly problematised. Does the painting mirror the skies that our waters have become too filthy to reflect? Kruger's response to the landscape tradition has occupied the years since *The Last of the Cool Skies*. Her message is not of despair but of wonder, and the garden is the place where her attention is most tightly focussed.

In our daily life the garden is the place where life, death, promise and decay, humus and rot are routinely experienced. In the garden we nourish treasured plants and uproot weeds. We see the immediate consequences of careless or hasty interaction with nature. For Kruger 'If we are to learn to cherish our environment the backyard must surely be the starting point'.¹ Elisabeth Kruger's work and gardens are inseparable. The artist works the garden, is nourished by it and records its dramas. Often a painting begins life as a moment of ecstatic vision which is then captured digitally; ensuing prints are culled and cropped until an image is developed for painting which recaptures that original moment.

Body and *Soul* 1994 are two important works in a series which explores the slow cycle of life as we eat and

are in turn consumed by the earth. Here the subject matter has been grown, painted and eaten. It has nourished the body as it now nourishes the soul. Both *Body* and *Soul* are studied arrangements of vegetables and flowers against the rich composted soil and the scattered detritus that inform our relationship with the garden. *Body* is an earthy painting, a reminder of our dependence on the grace of the earth, *Soul* a more fragile thing—the stuff of evocation rather than explicit expression, both are interconnected. The works are exquisitely painted and raise the expectation of minutely observed detail. However for Kruger:

The issue is not to render the natural world, but to raise questions and ideas about our relationship to it.

*Are we thieves, murderers or caretakers...?*²

In the same series a small painting of delicate lettuce seedlings with a predatory snail is as pregnant with high drama and moral dilemma as any grand biblical history painting. Whose death is foreshadowed here? What are the consequences? As part of the larger picture we must accept that other more pressing imperatives may be in play. *Body* and *Soul* explore equivalences, hidden violence and the potential for a perfect but fragile balance. Such a balance is achieved through an acknowledgement that body and soul we are of the earth, that the differences between the vegetal and the animal and even the spiritual are questions of degree. An important expression of Kruger's relationship with the vegetal is her *Asleep in the Garden* series of 1998.

This powerful body of work crafts a slippage between the traditional dualism of self and plant or human and nature. Kruger describes the origin of the series as an insight seized at that brief moment of awakening when she lay aware of the pulse of the garden. These works capture that half imagined moment when the essence of life, active in mysterious unseen internal parts, is almost palpable.³ In these paintings human and vegetal capillaries pulse with circulating liquids and the vessels and chambers morph from human to vegetal and back again. Whether the channels funnel blood or viscous sap, both are mostly water. The relationship is most explicit in *Nothing Need be Done* 1998 where an apparently familiar anatomical diagram suddenly sprouts sappy membranes and leafy extrusions. In *Without Nerve* 1998 layers of musculature are peeled back to reveal fragile bladders and internal organs which are somehow thick with flora. *Out of the Wind* 1998 foregrounds plant life but it too curves and arcs around a tangle of fleshy branches and honeycomb filters. The familiar morphologies of plant and animal share the infinite generative patterns constructed from reflections, inversions, vignettes and echoes. We are both other and the same. The surprising conjunction of apparently incompatible forms is a classic Surrealist technique. Despite received wisdom that human and plant are fundamentally different organisms, the works in this series make us see flesh and the vegetal as contiguous and in consequence fundamentally interdependent.

Like *Asleep in the Garden* the *Blot* series (nos 1-6) 1998⁴ also deploys Surrealist strategies to unsettle and

reconfigure our sense of the real. Here, even the laws which govern the Rorschach blot as nominal starting point are defied. Where the blot might have been expected to open the space of unreason to rational examination, the irrational colonises the inky scientific tool and takes over. Organic forms shadow the blot for a while and then take their own path—as flesh and flint, horn and glossy globules interpenetrate. This rampant biomorphism is more than a loss of faith in clinical reason; it represents a fundamental loss of faith in a rationality structured by traditional dualisms—where nature is variously pitted against reason, culture and the human. It is a loss of faith in the capacity of reason to triumphantly deliver a safe environment. In many ways the philosophic position so clearly enunciated in these blots opens the way to understanding the paintings of plants which have dominated Kruger's exhibitions in the late 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century. Respected environmental feminist Val Plumwood has similarly addressed this situation, writing that:

*rationalism and human/nature dualism have helped create ideals of culture and human identity that promote distance from, control of and ruthlessness towards the sphere of nature as the other, while minimising non-human claims to the earth, to elements of mind, reason and ethical consideration.*⁵

Within this paradigm Kruger's luscious paintings of vegetal life offer to open up pathways independent of blind scientific reason. However it is important to understand that for Kruger it is not the theoretical

or moral issue which blocks the potential for change but rather a weakness in the bonds of fellow feeling and caretaking, notably a caretaking that starts in the garden. For Kruger a garden is the obvious place to begin to care. The garden is above all the place where we are closest to nature, to the routine composted deaths and the eagerly awaited displays of sexuality and fertility.

The lush claustrophobic space of Kruger's garden throbs with sex and death. With *Ruffles and Folds* 2002 and more particularly in *Face pink* 2001 it seems that sexual organs whether plant or animal share common features. Here the anatomy is labial, the flushed petals inviting. Again our intimacy with the vegetal is foregrounded. Conceptually these works reference the *Asleep in the Garden* series. It seems that with *Plumwood*, Kruger is suggesting that "The ecological crisis requires from us a new kind of culture,"⁶ a culture where our similarities with the plant world are more important than our differences and a new kind of respect for the vegetal is the natural consequence. *Mirrored gul butterflyed* shares the sexuality of *Face pink* in its curiously cropped stems and petals which fold and reflect in a provocative Rorschach blot of its own. Indeed no painting of Kruger's is entirely free from this quality.

Although Kruger has clearly said that the art of painting is not sufficient end in itself it is also true that it is the quality of her craftsmanship that stuns and engages the viewer. Kruger's skill in composition, the architecture which underpins the excesses of beauty is exemplified in *Mirrored gul butterflyed*. Indeed the 'gul'

here is the proper name for a particular floral motif used in Persian carpets, often highly stylised through reflection and symmetry. This work is a compositional play on the flower as ornamental device. Both the flower and plant are digitally folded and warped to explore the decorative qualities of pattern and ornament, the traditional properties of the garden. Kruger's paint convincingly describes the different textures of petal and leaf, despite the impossible contortions of the original material. This work is highly disciplined almost to the point of being obsessive; there is a manic quality to the complex compositional devices which recalls the wild rhythms of Klezmer—that secular Jewish music tradition.

Wallcovering pinkey-green 2001 announces the series of impossibly beautiful portraits of garden plants that continues to the present. This triumphant rose has colonised the wall of both the garden and the gallery in a kind of ecstatic communion. Framed by earlier paintings the impossible beauty of this work is revealed as being party to a larger conceptual gravitas. Kruger's work operates through conversations between different series of works and connections between works over time. Here we are witness to another level of compositional complexity. We receive *Wallcovering pinkey-green* as a riot of familiar blooms, a quality of copiousness which borders on excess, but resolves as generosity. Yet in this abundance there is order and pattern. There is a release from the tight formal patterning of *Mirrored gul butterflyed* to a wilder, more feral, decorative play of the sort already apparent in the *Blot* series and *Nothing Need be Done*. The disorder

is announced as the one plant is broken into two canvasses and we wonder where the boundary between nature and artifice lies. This diptych is a play of reflection, repetition, structure and ornament, recalling Klezmer in its complexity. Each leaf and petal is a repetition by the plant on an original genetic template. Is a near identical bloom the improvisation of the artist or the plant? Is the plant responsible for the pattern of reflection and repetition which creates the graceful Hogarth curve and impossible bracketing of the central bud—or is this composition found and cropped from a vegetal original?

Climb 2007 is the partial portrait of a magnificent Pierre de Ronsard in the corner of one of Kruger's gardens. This rose holds nothing in reserve, devoting its all to this riotous display and its beauty is almost overwhelming. Like any portrait of a friend, the petty tell-tale details of personality and accident are lovingly and honestly transcribed. Stems bent by lost leaves rise from within the shadowy mass of foliage bearing their prized buds towards the hazy sky. The pattern of the petals within each rose, warped and pushed against themselves recall the nose of a snuffling Pekinese. The bruised or chewed leaves are neither a centre of focus nor hidden. Nothing is perfect; signs of damage are not tragedies but traces of the plant's engagement with life. Both painting and plant exist in slow time, real time, the product of accident, discipline and care. Despite her protestations of irrelevancy Kruger's skill in representing this riot of life is no trifling matter. The perfectionism of the artist is there in the details and her self-imposed painterly discipline is rigorous

and exacting. We feel as if each vein, each green secretive petal base could be made to open for us; as if each mad bloom could be turned from its riot to give up its scent. Despite the incidental character of the subject, the painting is articulated by a satisfyingly solid composition. Triangles hold the centre tight and focussed while strong buttressing diagonals anchor the diffuse subject. There are painterly pleasures too as the light teases open the ebullient foliage and columns of unseen sunlight are inferred from a pattern of light and shade bouncing back through the leaves. The tonal nuances of leaf overlapping leaf against the sun, some semi transparent, others, curled against the weather, are more opaque. The finely observed properties of the plant and the spaces between them are described in beautiful passages of paint.

Spill 2007 returns us to the dark world of cut stems, reflecting and refracting in a vase. Above the dying stems the riot of sweet pea blossoms are held in balance. Like an hourglass the life runs through the vase to the slimy water. As the blooms above the water draw up all available life force in a desperate drive towards reproduction, the stems void themselves of life, desiccating into nothingness to supply all they can before their inevitable return to undifferentiated slime. This work and *Seen in a Vase* 2003 bracket and frame much of the extravagant beauty of this decade. They are the necessary other to the joyous insouciance of such works as *Puff* 2003, *Ruffles and Folds* 2004 or *Climb*. *Seen in a Vase* is a dark underworld of a painting. In as much as *Mirrored gul butterfly* saw a manipulation of the floral as a decorative element, *Seen in a Vase* is

a magnification and repetition of the dark world of rotting cut stems, of death and decay. It references the surrealist tones of *Asleep in the Garden* and *Blot nos. 1-6*, reminding us that the concerns of that series are still current.

The beauty of Elisabeth Kruger's paintings is so insistent that it can cloud the subject of her work—the bonds of fellow feeling and caretaking with the vegetal. We are inspired to nurture these bonds in the garden along with the beloved plants. This is a beauty which is impossible without its other—death, (harvest), decay and rot. This is a vigour which is impossible to classify as simply vegetal, distinct from the larger environmental context. It is in this sense that the garden for Kruger is both subject and metaphor; subject in that it is in the garden that we learn to love and care for our small environment; metaphor in that in the garden we learn to recognise ourselves as part of a larger community of life. Kruger's portraits of life, energy and beauty are the inevitable result of such an engagement.

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Canberra

1 Elisabeth Kruger, 'Unpublished manuscript' c1995. Courtesy of the author.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Email from the artist 10/2/2010.

4 Acquired by the ANU Art Collection following the *Australian Drawing Biennale* at the Drill Hall Gallery.

5 Plumwood, V. (2002). *Environmental Culture – The ecological crisis of reason*. London, Routledge. p. 4.

6 *Ibid.* p. 4.