

GETTING TO THE HE(CART) OF THE MATTER / POLLY BORLAND

Photographer Polly Borland has worked in commercial and celebrity portraiture through to essays and offbeat reportage. *Bunny* is her latest exhibition and, like her first exhibition *The Babies* (a confronting study of men who enjoy dressing up and acting as babies), it strikes an edgy balance between performance and spontaneity. In *Bunny*, Borland upturns notions of the original bunny girl through the surreal and theatrical poses of her unusually tall subject, six-foot three-inch actor Gwendoline Christie, whom Borland noticed in the streets of Brighton, England, where she now lives.

Raised in Melbourne, Borland studied photography at the highly regarded Prahran Technical College in the early eighties. Active in the artistic Melbourne punk movement and, later, the explosive independent fashion scene, Borland developed a distinctive style and technique. This she honed through her work on innovative film clips, including INXS's 'What You Need', directed by Richard Lowenstein, and later on feature films such as Lowenstein's *Dogs in Space* and John Hillcoat's *Ghosts of the Civil Dead*.

Borland then took her technical and artistic skills into the more commercial world of Australian *Vogue*, where she produced many editorials. In 1989, she left for the UK and embarked on reportage work for newspapers including the *Independent on Sunday Review* and the *Daily Telegraph*, and the *Sunday Telegraph Magazine*. In 1994, she won the coveted John Kobal Photographic Portrait Award for her portrait of Adrianna, a Brazilian transvestite, taken as part of a reportage series. Borland was also producing commercial and celebrity portraiture for magazines

including *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Arena* and *Dazed & Confused*.

In 1999/2000, the London and Canberra-based National Portrait Galleries commissioned and later exhibited Borland's *The Australians*, fifty portraits of celebrated expatriates – including Les Patterson, (a naked) Germaine Greer and (the three legs of) Rolf Harris. In 2002, Borland was one of twelve photographers invited to take an official portrait of the Queen for her Golden Jubilee year. Inspired by Warhol and Pop Art, Borland used a Marimekko print as a backdrop, creating a powerful contrast while still (playfully) honouring her subject.

The success of Borland's photographs owes much to her ability to gain the trust of her subjects and to collaborate. In 2005, Borland's long association with fashion designer Martin Grant culminated in her contributing to a major retrospective of his work held at the National Gallery of Victoria. Here, her full-length portraits were projected onto the walls of the gallery as people moved through, recreating the feel of a fashion happening. In Borland's personal projects, while she directs her subjects and often provides unusual contexts, she also gives them the space to explore their own fantasies.

In *Bunny*, Borland got to know her subject Gwen over a three-year period, gaining her trust and allowing their collaboration to evolve. Borland's bold use of perspective, paint and props such as a horse's head, blonde wig and handmade pink bunny suit accentuate and expose her subject, heightening her vulnerability while maintaining a sense of play. Underlying the commentary on fetichisms and the stark physicality



of the flesh trades is a humour, defiance and raw honesty. It is this that gives the series its unsettling beauty and appeal. Drawing on the work of surrealists Man Ray and Cahun, Borland balances her use of fantastic and at times shocking elements with a meticulous eye for form. She underscores this with her painterly approach to colour; some images are flooded with a seedy red, and others are bleached into pinks and blues, echoing the body's fleshy and veined palette.

Ultimately, what draws the viewer into Borland's world is the paradox between her controversial choice of subjects and her ability to

bring out their beauty and vulnerability. As Borland says about her work, "I am primarily interested in people and humanity. I am not interested in glamorising or glossing over life."

Damien Hirst's publishing company, Other Criteria, has produced a monograph of *Bunny*, featuring an essay by British novelist Will Self and a poem by Nick Cave. For more information go to www.othercriteria.com

[Ruth Learner]