

Barnacles

Yvonne Todd

15 Feb - 7 Mar, 2017

Opening preview: Wed 15 Feb, 4 - 7pm

Artist talk: Wed 22 Feb, 11am

Interpreting Barnacles

by Lucy Jackson (2017)

Once again Yvonne Todd leaves everything to the imagination in her latest series of work, *Barnacles*. Followers of Yvonne know that the key to her works is in the details of her beautifully composed and intricately arranged photographs. Yvonne never – and I doubt she ever will – exposes the exact meaning behind her art, but then, why should she? What she offers instead is a dialogue between pieces – sometimes context or auto-biographical details – that allow for multiple interpretations of each work. Quite simply, Yvonne creates ambiguity to generate conversation.

This remains true for *Barnacles* in which Yvonne has constructed six figures (of which four are exhibited here), and two still life works. On the surface, it is strikingly obvious that Yvonne is playing with ideas of pregnancy and costume (timely of her own pregnancy during the time she constructed this series), and it is easy to end the analysis of her series there. But, upon closer examination, a common thread emerges between each piece, a unifying language that can only be interpreted by eager viewers.

Moone, is a photograph of an adult woman, wearing an oversized, quilted, almost couture bib with matching dress. The grey backdrop Yvonne uses for her photography creates a stark contrast, focusing the viewer to consider the manner in which Yvonne has dressed this model – as an infant, while allowing her face and pose to remain adult. We can question why there is a need for this woman to wear a bib, is it for a functional reason, or is Yvonne suggesting that even when babies grow into adults, they still remain someone's baby? Of course, bibs are not

always for babies, some elderly in rest homes are also made to wear a bib due to them spilling food.

The name of Yvonne's most disturbing photograph in this exhibition, *Infanta*, is the name also used to describe the eldest daughter of the ruling monarch of Spain or Portugal. *Infanta* depicts a menacing figure completely consumed by the outfit she is wearing. The model is a psychedelic sea of greens and reds, swirls and flowers at odds with the Victorian style of costume that devours her body and conceals her face. The only parts of the model left for us to see are her hair (a wig? As is Yvonne's forte), and a thumb. One interpretation could be that the costume's restriction of the woman's entire body reflects the consumption of pregnancy on a woman's body. The woman no longer has an identity, linking to the idea that pregnancy, and later on parenthood, strip a mother of her individuality (and dignity during childbirth), as she becomes an extension of her children's lives.

Amateur Theatre provides a few clues to Yvonne's purpose. Its name is direct and Yvonne herself referenced creating a set of ingénues – that is, innocent, unsophisticated stage women. Like *Infanta*, the costume is the most distinct feature which opposes the dull grey background (a staple in Yvonne's repertoire). The model wears striking Peggy Moffitt inspired eye makeup, new to Yvonne's portraiture, but her body has been swamped in what appears to be an oversized drawstring bag with curtain tassels, reminiscent of a stage curtain. The ensemble and title work hand in hand, presenting a woman who is overwhelmed with the pressure of the stage, seen

through her garish makeup, and swamped by the stage curtain costume. Yvonne has created *Amateur Theatre* as a symbol to show the overwhelming nature of having a child and the new 'role' the woman must play as 'mother', and the pressures of parenthood.

The costumes in *Moone*, *Infanta* and *Amateur Theatre* offer a curious link to the idea of motherhood and family. Yvonne's previous outfit-centred portraits were from repurposed vintage garments, but on this occasion, the artist chose the fabrics from bargain shop Spotlight, designed the costumes for the *Barnacles* series, and then asked her mother to sew them. I'm sure many mothers and daughters remember a time when they designed ludicrous outfits in garish fabrics that they then thrust upon their mother to sew for them, thinking it was a good idea. While preparing to have her own baby, Yvonne relies on her mother, suggesting that our identities of parent and child are always blurred. The other interesting point to note, is that all these outfits restrict the women inside them, and change their bodies, perhaps indicating the idea of pregnancy as constraining on the woman, and that a woman's identity becomes defined by her pregnancy and new role as mother.

Augusta brings us to the first still life of *Barnacles*. An ethereal pink raincoat that Yvonne found abandoned in a gutter has been photographed floating in an atmospheric hue of black and pink. The raincoat almost forms a figure in shape, with the hood up and arm out, but remains fully celluloid. While as a stand alone piece *Augusta* may offer a different meaning, in the assembly of the other photographs in *Barnacles*, this piece of wet weather gear takes on the guise of placenta, or other bodily remains of childbirth. Above this, Yvonne has once again alluded to motherhood in her titling, with *Augusta* being the name given to Roman Emperor's daughters or wives, and defined as magnificent.

Sack-like the second still life in the series depicts exactly what the title states, a sack on a mottled backdrop and foreground. However, there is an ambiguity in this photograph – what is in this sack? And

surely what we see can't be sack-like when it is a sack, so is this object pretending to be a sack when really it isn't? Yvonne throws us with her title, and we can't help but think of women believing they look 'sack-like' when they're pregnant, or wear 'sack-like' maternity clothes. When carrying a baby our only purpose is to be sack-like, carrying the goods inside us, insuring a safe delivery at the end. Is this the deeper intention Yvonne is alluding too with this sack the changing of the female body during and after pregnancy?

Self Portrait (39 weeks) brings us to the last work in this exhibition. It is smaller than the others; demure on one hand, revealing on the other. Pictured is the artist herself at full term, in a blue valour bodysuit, stomach exposed against a swirling background of blues. Yvonne's version of the pregnancy portrait is very different to what others choose nowadays (usually a scene of flowing Grecian robes and close ups of hands on stomach bumps, or over the top celebrity pregnancy portraiture), and instead is a tight, awkward photograph in which the artist doesn't look made up, but looks accepting of the bump in front of her. Yvonne looks serene of her bump, as if she has made peace with her changing body. The outfit is odd, a strange fit for this photograph, but works with the swirling background. I wonder if the reason for both a blue unitard and background is to indicate the impending arrival of her now baby boy. Perhaps the reason for Yvonne's bump being exposed in this photograph is linked to the attention a bump gets, becoming the main focus of the expectant mother's identity to other people.

Barnacles, or a barnacle, is a person or thing that clings tenaciously. Is Yvonne suggesting that this is what babies do? Cling to what is closest to them, in both pregnancy, childhood and beyond? Do we ever stop clinging to someone? These photographs allow us to examine not only the artist's relationship to her newborn son and her experience of pregnancy, but also the relationship we as viewers have to either our offspring, or our parents, and consider whether we are still a barnacle.

Lucy Jackson is an art addict who resides in Wellington and works at a museum and public art gallery. For her Honours dissertation, Jackson wrote about Yvonne Todd's series 'The Wall of Man' and the effect curatorial positioning of these works play in visitor experience. Jackson's interest is in contemporary art and in particular photographs taken by women. Jackson is undertaking the Masters of Museum and Heritage Practice at Victoria University of Wellington this year.