

**FAUST Chantal
thummee**

Abstract

The formations and desires of the body feed my work. The objects used to create large-scale photographic images are taken from the everyday and incorporate familiar matter in other positions. The research practice is process-driven and has an experimental approach. Found and created inanimate objects function as symbols which are anatomized, inverted physically or by a reconstruction of definition, and imaged. The means of production are often quite apparent and exchangeable. One of my main objectives within the images is to deliberately make explicit the sexualised bias of vision. The re-application of existing objects aims for their original definition to merge with the reworked meaning they obtain through association and/or transformation. The materials act as mutually referential signs.

Recent works have been focusing on infantile sexuality and in particular, the power of toothless sucking and the oral plug which can provide life supporting nourishment and a transcendental solace. The suckling reflex exists from birth and the breast, bottle, dummy and thumb nurse an oral tradition of sucking pleasure. The thumb is convenient and made to order, offering the sucker a position of control in being independent of the external world. Certain images attempt to evoke the blissful state of escapist drifting of the thumbsucker - who at some stage between cuteness and perversity is often discouraged from the activity. My current work is concerned with the power of the suck as a release vehicle, the object of the suck, the processing of infantile sexuality, and the mature sucking drive.

Biography

Chantal Faust is currently completing a Master of Fine Art degree at the Victorian College of the Arts where she has previously undertaken a BFA Hons (Photography). Chantal has been tutoring in the Art History and Photography departments at the VCA during 2003. She received an Australian Post-Graduate Award at the commencement of the Masters degree and a Pat Corrigan Artist's Grant for an exhibition held this year in May. In 2003 Chantal showed her *thumbcrack* at 24seven in Melbourne, her *thummee* at West Space Inc. and was a finalist in the inaugural *Australian Photographic Portrait Prize* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the *National Photographic Purchase Award* at the Albury Regional Art Gallery as well as being involved in group exhibitions in Melbourne at the Jewish Museum, BUS, Kings Artist Run Space and 69 Smith Street.

thummee

JELLESIS

In the beginning I created jellyfish.

And the jellyfish were without form - colonies of individual, specialized cell types rather than complete organisms.

And darkness *was* upon my face as I was unsure of their role in contemporary art theory.

And then the spirit of Mastoid moved upon the jellyfish when one was born from gelatin and shrink-wrap.

And so it was said; Let it be a breast: and it was a breast.

And I saw the breast, and that *it was* good: and so I divided the breast from the jellyfish.

And the spirit of Mastoid said, Let us find a plastic dog toy in the likeness of a meat chop: and let it be white and red with a nipples suction cup, so that when it is sliced in half and inverted it becomes an embodiment of a female breast.

And it was so.

And the spirit said, Behold, I have given you a breast bearing seed, which *is* upon the supermarkets and pet shops of all the earth, and a nipple, in the which *is* the milk of all images and plastic objects; to you it shall be for meat.

And so I was taken, and placed into the garden of VCA to dress it and to nurture it.

And I said, This *is* now the breast of my breasts, and the chop of my chops, and we became one flesh, and were both suckling unashamed.

But in the shadows lurked thumb.

thumb

The formations and desires of the body feed my work. Inanimate objects function as symbols to contemplate the living world and explore the space of and distance between what things are and what they mean. The objects used to create images are taken from the everyday and incorporate familiar matter in other positions.

The research practice is process-driven and has an experimental approach that is studio dependent. Found and created objects are anatomized, inverted physically or by a reconstruction of definition, and imaged. The means of production are often quite apparent and exchangeable. The studio is the site of the construction and dissection of pieces that often have no distinguishable conception or conclusion. It functions as a laboratory, a beauty salon, a surgery, a pet shop and a nursery. A container of assemblages which change with each prop - melding into one another, subtracting some parts, adding others.

The physical process of information collection is a major component of my research. Sourcing the object is a heartfelt act which relies on instinct, experience, and an unconditional loving connection that knows no boundaries. Work on a particular project becomes a constant reflection which - once recognized - manifests itself within general perception and allows the eyes to operate as an ever-alert, high-resolution, portable visual field scanner.

Scanner-vision is a concentrated and selective process that responds to an emotional pull from the bait of a particular object. This passionate connection between gaze and object is created through recognition, remembrance, resemblance and the lure of potentiality. Whilst being a fluid process that feeds on instinct and initial response, it can be aimed towards scanning for items which will respond or add to a developing system of language.

As a practicing scanner, I frequently input objects which are sourced from fields of abundant stock. These sites may include two-dollar shops, bargain bins, supermarkets, pet-shops, toy-shops and pharmacies. My field-scanner is entranced by a Tupperware palette of materials which are often constructed from plastic or rubber and may bend, be perforated, require incision, inversion or a partner. It is on high-alert when the object resembles a body part or a body plug and when the design suggests at something other than its assumed function. Collections of objects over the past two years have included items such as make-up foundation, plastic containers, baby products, and dog toys. These represent a continually expanding and cross-referencing alphabet through which I can communicate my research inquiries in the form of a visual language.

Objectifying the Object

One of the main objectives when scanning to select objects to incorporate in my work is to deliberately make explicit the sexualized bias of vision. The re-application of existing objects aims for their original definition to merge with the reworked meaning they obtain through association and/or transformation. The materials therefore act as mutually referential symbols. British artist Sarah Lucas says of her assemblages

which utilize the found object: "Every time you make an object, that object has found its way through. And the materials you use have found their way within that. In a peculiar way these things have to come about simultaneously."¹

Flat-Bed Scanning

Within my laboratory, the final phase of the collected objects is often in the form of a photographic image that is produced using a flat-bed scanner as a camera. From field-scan to flat-bed, direct-object computer scanning allows the digital machine to provide a stamp or impression rather than a manipulated 'photo-shopped' image. The object is pressed against a glass plate under which a horizontal light beam slowly travels as it records what lies above. Referencing photo-grams, cat-scans, cartoon CELS, photocopying and flat-press toasted sandwich makers, this technique can flatten and distort depending on pressure, movement and the ingredients of the object. Any surface that is directly applied to the glass plate will be completely in focus and this results in a distorted depth of field and a hyper-real surface tension of the object. The imaging process directs the gaze and distills the object by confounding scale and distorting perspective.

Like the concurrent actions of Eros and the death instinct², the residue is a photographic death³ which creates an illusory 'little-death' cloud that perpetually hovers above the apparatus of the desiring machine whose hungry pleasure will never be sated (it's ultimate desire being its own death). There is an elasticity of organs at work in this desire-in-vision⁴ where the eye (which allows distance) succumbs to the oral desire for proximity - as with the infant who cannot distinguish between its eye and mouth organs⁵. The discharged image however, can never be penetrated by the mechanism which worked to create it. It remains forever charged and frozen in a stretched moment. It is desire prolonged.

The clarity and tactility of the imaged object discharged from a flat-bed scanner ventures to identify the process with the production - this artificial medium scans plastic objects and outputs images with a semblance of corporeality. Similarly within advertising and the media, plastic and artificial (re)creations of the female form are promoted and idolized as the 'perfect' woman. This brings me around to the humble jellyfish. These amalgam species represent a being which has the ability to exist with no apparent internal or external structure due to their lack of skeleton or shell. In 1963 Marcel Broodthaers wrote of their enigma: "*The Jellyfish/ It's perfect/ No mold/ Nothing but body*"⁶.

The jellyfish constructions led me to an investigation of artificial representations of the female body and the operations of disguise and transformation that women in our society are often encouraged to adopt in order to embody impossible specimens of perfection. The work has a laboratory style aesthetic and the sculpted objects which are also present in the images have similarly been dissected and reconstructed in order to examine the restructuring of identity that occurs when the body's natural surface is mutated in the pursuit of 'normative' beauty. By physically inverting plastic representations of meat to reveal a form that resembles a raw construction of the female body, I was attempting to uncover the flesh behind the flawless veneer.

Breasts have been a recurring motif in my work. They have almost infinite commercial possibilities within our breast-obsessed society. Not only do they nourish relevant consumer products, such as bras, body lotions, and cosmetic surgery - but they also have the endowment to promote the sales of merchandise when depicted abreast of anything from cars to toothpaste. In 1995 Dr. Dominique Gros cited that "...*you can sell anything you want with a breast*"⁷. The notion of a franchised breast is depicted within *breastburger*. This image contains an artificial depiction of a pair of breasts constructed out of plastic hamburgers, pink nipped rubber finger protectors and plastic chops. The burgers provide an allusion to a have-it-now&throwaway global culture where the breast is simply part of a consumer paradise.

During the MFA I have transferred my interest from the dislocated, mutated and homogenized breast to focus on the suckled breast which acts as a human pacifier. This has expanded to include breast substitutes such as thumbs and other things which are sucked and provide comfort from the earliest stages of being and beyond.

To date, the spirit of thummee is best captured in the phrase:
cogito ergo thum (which is Latin for: *I think, therefore I suck*).

Recent works have been focused on the carnal habitat of the infant nursery. *Terence* is an image which concentrates on the implied genitalia of a toy cow. There has been much discussion surrounding children's toys and the implications of encouraging conventional gender roles. However it doesn't really matter if Barbie is Snow White or Secretary, her eventual fate is to be naked and decapitated. Sometimes her little undies can be very difficult to remove as they have been stitched too tightly around her minuscule waist to bring them down over her curvy thighs. But it is that which lies underneath where the fascination resides: in what I have learnt is referred to by experts as The Front Bottom⁸. The Front Bottom is located at the base of the torso and is generally recognised as a blank, impenetrable skin-coloured plastic mound. Occasionally there will be a crevice which delineates a distinction from the actual bottom. As Barbie has progressed through time, very little has changed as to the view up her skirt. Or so I thought until I was given Snow White Barbie for my birthday. She came with apple and hairbrush and everyone wanted to touch her hair and squoosh her face. At the end of the night we were finally alone together, and after a few drinks I raised her skirt of golden flowers to discover that she had the B for Barbie logo and little flowers embossed all over her mound, but nowhere else on her body. It dawned on me that the marketing committee at Mattel had realised with vicarious pleasure the marketing possibilities for this most fascinating element of the Barbie doll, and were milking it.

Other works have been focusing on infantile sexuality and in particular, the power of toothless sucking and the oral plug (whether it be breast or rubber teat) which can provide life supporting nourishment and a transcendental solace. The suckling reflex exists from birth⁹ and the breast, bottle, dummy and thumb nurse an oral tradition of sucking pleasure. The pacifier or dummy - an object used to silence and appease - is one of the first encounters in life with an artificial breast. The thumb is convenient and made to order, offering the sucker a position of control in being independent of the external world.

The sucker is often transported into a blissful state of escapist drifting suggestive of *jouissance*¹⁰ - unadulterated, boundless, pre-Oedipal pleasure. Associated with the female, "this metaphoric realm imagines a body with no boundaries, a body with multiple and autonomous erotic zones"¹¹, a body in full possession of its own desire.

In 1919, a Dr. Galant published this 'confession' of a woman who had never given up the 'infantile sexual activity': "...it is impossible to describe what a lovely feeling goes through your whole body when you suck; you are right away from this world. You are absolutely satisfied, and happy beyond desire. It is a wonderful feeling; you long for nothing but peace - uninterrupted peace. It is just unspeakably lovely: you feel no pain and no sorrow, and you are carried into another world"¹².

The plight of the thumbsucker is generally curtailed at the intersection between innocence and apparent perversity. Thumbsuckers who were never denied thumb and habitually indulge, would surely find the suck a relaxing and dreamy act and one that is an automatic reflex. However in many cases, a shift to a guilt-ridden consciousness where desires and conduct must be hidden can occur when thummee becomes Thumb and a danger lurks in the assumed auto-erotic gratification which the sucker appears to gain. This involves an observed sensuality of the suck as a moist warm den in which the thumb lies on a soft bed of tongue and is sucked on with repetitive rhythm. In his *Essays on Sexuality* Freud introduces the pleasure of the suck by stating that "No one who has seen a baby sinking back satiated from the breast and falling asleep with flushed cheeks and a blissful smile can escape the reflection that this picture persists as a prototype of the expression of sexual satisfaction in later life." Vigorous sucking becomes a confronting signifier of infantile sexuality which is discouraged and an alternate method of gratification must be sought elsewhere.

thummee is concerned with the power of the suck as a release vehicle,

the object of the suck, the processing of infantile sexuality, and the pleasure in pressure that is the sucking drive.

¹ van Adrichem, J., Sarah Lucas, Museum Boymans Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1996, p.4.

²Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents (1930), *Standard Edition*, trans. James Strachey, (London: Vintage, 2001), p.119.

³ Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, (London: Vintage, 1993), p.92.

⁴ Rosalind E. Krauss, The Optical Unconscious, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), p.125.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, Infantile Sexuality (1920), in On Sexuality, trans. Angela Richards, (London: Penguin, 1991), pp.88-126.

⁶ Broodthaers, M., La Méduse from Pense-Bete in Writings, Interviews, Photographs, ed. Buchloh, B., Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988, pp.28-29.

⁷ Gros, D., Images of Paradise, Flamingo Press, London, 1995, p.26.

⁸ See anyone under the age of 8

⁹ Hinshelwood, R. & Robinson S., Melanie Klein, Icon, Cambridge, 1999.

¹⁰ Emily Apter, Feminizing the Fetish, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp.122-25.

¹¹ Nancy Spector, The Mechanics of Fluids, in Parkett, No.48, (Zurich: December, 1996), p.85.

¹² Freud, S., On Sexuality, Penguin, London, 1991.