

Acknowledgements

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CASINO SISYPHUS

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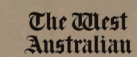
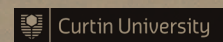
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CASINO SISYPHUS

ANNA NAZZARI





'Luck be a lady tonight' sings Frank Sinatra. The players gather in a huddle. A willed agitation of the hand, a pursing of the lips, a kiss for luck, a hush, an extended pause as though time is held in the anticipation, and the dice roll. All eyes are fixed. Luck, be a lady tonight. It's a classic scene from the musical, *Guys and Dolls*. Whereas Shakespeare may have claimed that 'all the world's a stage', in this exhibition, Anna Nazzari contends that we, the actors upon it, are set against an indelible backdrop of the absurd and cast to play out a gendered game in which a revolt against the conventional binary opposition of male and female is both meaningless and futile. In *Casino Sisyphus* that postmodern desire for liberating the self from patriarchal norms by destabilising these binaries through gender ambiguous role play is revealed as illusionary and incapable of success. Yet, like Nathan Detroit in *Guys and Dolls* we keep rolling the dice for there is always hope that one day the odds will turn in our favour; that luck will be a "lady" tonight.

While I have my doubts about the gender of luck, David Walliams' character, Emily (Eddie Howard) in the TV program, *Little Britain*, has no such qualms when s/he repeatedly proclaims, "I'm a Lady." And we, the audience, laugh at each telling. For clearly it is absurd. It is patently obvious to us that s/he is no lady but rather a man dressed up in the clothes of an out-moded Victorian woman who is affecting various feminine graces of the period. Walliams' transvestite character helps to illustrate the questions that have emerged since the feminist debates in the 1980s

regarding gender and the ways in which labels such as feminine and masculine have been assigned to certain body types and characteristics. It has been argued that gender entails not only male and female bodies but also those that lie outside this traditional binary separation such as transvestite, transsexual and transgendered ones. Theorists like Judith Butler (1990) suggest that, rather than grounded in a biological form, gender is flexible and performative, and each of us act out to varying degrees socially prescribed types of behaviour whether codified as masculine, feminine or shades in between. For Anna Nazzari these debates provide the playground for queering our assumptions. Through her work, she highlights the absurdity of attempts to act outside these patriarchal conventions because, not only is the dice loaded, but the game is fixed.

Within classical mythology, Sisyphus is condemned to an existence of rolling the same rock up a hillside only to have it roll back down again and so he must repeat the task for all eternity. In his account of the myth, Albert Camus (2000) considers that Sisyphus epitomises the absurdity of the human condition as our ongoing quest for meaning in our lives is thwarted by the meaningless circumstances in which we are placed. Much as we search for stability and rationality in our world, there is no point. Like Sisyphus, our actions are futile for we face a repetitive cycle of irrational order. When applied to the issue of gender, the absurdity of trying to revolt against patriarchal norms becomes evident. Anna Nazzari looks throughout history, seeking those who Leslie Feinberg

has described as transgender warriors (1996), people like Joan of Arc, who attempt to deny the binary coding of masculine and feminine through seemingly subversive acts such as cross dressing, only to find their rebellion is pointless. However, rather than taking a nihilist view as Camus does and despairing of the inability to free oneself from patriarchal norms through gender ambiguous behaviour, Anna Nazzari sees hope; not in salvation, nor in the longed for ultimate overthrow of patriarchy, but in the inherent pleasures found in the paradoxes that pervade the game of life. Evidence of these can be seen in the very qualities that compel me as a viewer to delight in her art.

Along with the devious humour lurking in these not so shady corners, what draws me first and foremost to Anna Nazzari's work is the exceptional level of crafting featured in it. Her deftness of the hand in the carved objects, in the marquetry and in the fine finishes, as well as the resolve of each mechanism, points to a high degree of sophisticated artistry and professionalism. I imagine the hours, days and months she has spent in the studio toiling away for her art. But before I fall into that insidious patriarchal romance of the artist as heroic genius, I glimpse the underlying paradoxes. This is no romantic fiction where the misunderstood, starving and penniless, male artist struggles in his garret for the undying angst and all consuming passion of high art. Instead it is the repetitive crafting of a woman in her backyard shed in the cold drafts of winter and sweltering heat of Western Australian summers. And for

what? Pecuniary rewards? Unlikely, for in a capitalist framework, the ticket price of the artwork bears little relationship to the incommensurable number of hours spent making and as such it would be regarded as somewhat unproductive labour.

But what is this labour? A labour of love? A question, I cannot answer. A labour of joy? Perhaps, in those moments artists embrace when the work seems to complete itself. More pertinently, it is the labour of Sisyphus, a repetitive act in the quest for meaning set against the impossibility of revolt in a meaningless world. However, as Camus suggests, art not only provides a mechanism for revolting against the absurdity of human existence but also offers the chance for liberation. By actively doing art, by engaging in the risky behaviour of an art life, Anna Nazzari creates the illusion of hope and success. By revelling in the playful pursuit of meaning through various tropes of nostalgia, art, history and gender politics, she crafts a world of possibility. When as viewer, I enter her game with reality and the absurd contradictions she envisages, I too take that illusive chance to beat the odds.

In *Casino Sisyphus* we encounter the culmination of intensive research in both the theoretical archives and studio practice. Importantly, given the depth of the aforementioned conceptual underpinnings that inform these works, Anna Nazzari is not heavy handed in her choice of materials or mode of presentation. There is no dogmatic posturing about patriarchal injustices, about

Judeo-Christian moralities, or gendered hierarchies, rather the rigour of her investigations is evident in the multi-layered and subtle nuances that play throughout the exhibited works. Like a well written tragedy or scripted comedy, this exhibition balances pathos and joy to present serious humours. Though the absurdity of our gendered reality is pervasive, and the futility of revolt against it is unrelenting, there is no reason why we should not gambol in its perversity. Luck may not be a lady tonight but art certainly is the winner.

Ann Schilo
August, 2010.
Dr Ann Schilo works in the School of Design and Art at Curtin University.

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IMAGES

From Left to right

(Fig. 1)

Detail of *Toute le Monde Gagne*

(Fig. 2)

Detail of *Arc de Triomphe*

(Fig. 3)

Detail of *Arc de Triomphe*

(Fig. 4)

Detail of *Toute le Monde Gagne*

(Fig. 5)

Detail of *Toute le Monde Gagne*