Primavera 2008

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As a general rule, only unhappy relationships are interesting. It may be, as Tolstoy observed, that happy families really do resemble each other, or, more likely, that contentment is not an emotion usually driven to express itself. There’s something almost menacing about couples that flaunt their fulfillment in public, as if the entire performance is just designed to elicit envy and heighten the anticipation of the inevitable misery delivering potpourri. Even Marina Abramovic and Ulay’s epic romantic trek towards each other from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China in 1988 was just a prod to the thorn breaking up in the middle, and if that’s too Jude the Obsolete, pick up any copy of Grazia magazine for a half dozen more familiar examples. It’s this extended courtship with disaster that lends the work of Ms & Mr its perverse fascination.

Stephanie and Richard now Mine are married in real life. They married young, at art school, and their art work is wholly concerned with the depiction of conjugal bliss and fulfilled longing. That would be unbearable if it weren’t so uncanny. I read you here and not there too, 1967/2008, consists of a series of archival drawings and videos from their respective childhoods, into which they’ve retrospectively included their adult lover. Stephanie’s twelve-year-old drawings depicting a pantomime cartoon of Macbeth, feature Richard, added with her adult hand, wandering about the scenery in knight-errant mode looking for his future bride. There’s even a well-executed copulation under Banquo’s nose, but he has bigger things to worry about. On the opposite wall, a home video of Richard as a child has been digitally edited to include the adult Stephanie, maternally guiding the boy’s hand as he draws what will presumably turn out to be a picture of her. It seems wise that the curator Hannah Matthews chose to hang the works of Ms & Mr as far as possible from the very adult figures photographed by Paul Knight, who seem desperately lonely even when fornicating.

Ms & Mr presented their work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney alongside that of eleven other participating artists, including Pilar Mata Dupont & Tammy Gill, Ant Hamzic, Mark Hilton, Moya McKenna, Gemma Smith and Sadee Jerk. This year’s show was ostensibly unthreatened but it displayed a logic of its own. Threads of enchantment and disappointment alternated with nostalgia and loneliness, as if the artists – with the notable exception of Danielle Freakley – found themselves inclined to ruthless agnosticism about the power of art.

Freakley is a 26-year-old artist who only repeats things that have already been said. That’s nothing unusual in and of itself, but in Freakley’s case, she also always provides the source and the date. Her alter ego, The quote generator, 2006, so completely consumed her life that a psychiatrist diagnosed her with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and suggested medication. When asked how she felt about this, Freakley told Sydney journalist Louise Schwartzkopf: “I’m possessed by a demon. – Nina Hagen, 1979. I felt miserable. My clothes felt miserably tight – Lotte, 1965.”

Conversation with Freakley consists of a stochastic sequence of quotes and citations, and she’s been keeping it up for years in the face of the obvious problem that no-one in their right mind wants to talk to her for more than a couple of minutes. A video documenting her work shows drinks outside a pub launching into trades of abuse, and a middle-aged man, captive next to her on an aeroplane flight, attempting to politely disengage. The work makes you cringe, but that’s somehow the point. Paul Cian once observed that an “outsider artist” is just someone guilty of taking the redemptive promise of art too seriously. That’s also what makes Freakley heroic in the manner of Chris Burden or Vito Acconci. If she is guilty of anything, it’s too much fact. She pushes her work into territory where executing it comes at such personal cost that it becomes impossible to doubt her sincerity.

There was an uneasy symmetry between Freakley and Ms & Mr. One of the more striking videos showed the latter engaged in a sort of square dance on a distant moon. Angelic and unattainable, they inhabit an outer space arcadia, but you can’t join them, there is no air to breathe. Freakley, on the other hand, is very much present and urgently wants to tell you something, but she has only others’ words to speak. Maybe it was coincidence, or maybe the missing link was promised by Marcus Canning’s giant downhill hot Pink intense. 2008, slowly forming a large abject puddle in the centre of the floor.