

DAZZLING FACETS

DEL KATHRYN BARTON PLUMBS
THE DEPTHS OF WOMANHOOD
AND ALL THE PAINSTAKING,
GLITTERING, AND STRANGE
TRUTHS THEREIN

BY JULIET HELMKE

A FIRE LAID WASTE not only to Del Kathryn Barton's first exhibition, but also to her childhood home when her parents' old farmhouse, located in a rural area outside of Sydney, went up in flames—with all of her work for the show stored inside. To any other artist, this might have been taken as a sign, especially given that Barton had retreated to her parents' property after a physical breakdown and a crisis in confidence while in her final year at art school. "I had kind of lost faith as to whether I really could pursue art as my career," she tells me one early morning, Skyping from her studio, a former ice cream factory in Sydney's inner-eastern suburbs ("We're in an old freezer so the walls are super thick!").

"It's no criticism of the art school itself," she says of her alma mater, the College of Fine Arts at the University of New South Wales, but at the time she attended, in the early 1990s, it was particularly conceptual in focus. Barton's work—painstakingly crafted paintings, most often of angular, ethereal women executed in a brilliant array of colors with dots and repetitive patterns and lines, and equally labor-intensive drawings with a similar attention to decorative minutiae—was considered somewhat traditional in its emphasis on the handmade and its basis in a studio-centered practice. "I found art school really tough," she remembers, "and I was eventually diagnosed with chronic fatigue. So I went back to the country." There, after some recuperation, her attention to making a new body of work became obsessive, and she fabricated the series of drawings that was never to be shown. But the symbolism



Helmke, Juliet. "Dazzling Facets," *Modern Painters*. July 2017.

albertz benda

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001
tel 212.244.2579 | www.albertzbenda.com

RIGHT:
the wing and
me – you find
your own heart,
2017. Acrylic on
French linen,
78¾ x 71 in.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
I Am Feeling What
You Feel, left, and
Meeting Place,
right, both 2008.
Watercolor,
gouache, and ink
on hot pressed
paper, 32¼ x 24½
in. each.



“I DO HAVE AN
UNASHAMEDLY
DECORATIVE
AESTHETIC.”

that Barton took from this hardship was not what many in her position would have concluded. “I felt I was being thrust back out into the world,” she says—into a life of art making.

The Australian art landscape would scarcely be what it is today without Barton’s influence. She won the Archibald Prize—the country’s most prestigious and, often, front-page headline-making award for portraiture—twice, and the first time she received it, in 2008, was with a nine-foot-high canvas featuring her own likeness, cradling her young son and

daughter in between her open legs. Borne resolutely out of devotion to her newfound role as a mother, she titled the image *You are what is most beautiful about me*. Of the few women who had taken the prize before her (only eight in the award’s 96-year history), even fewer had depicted members of their own gender. To say Barton’s subject matter in this traditionally-rooted, somewhat staid competition—which has more than once been won with a painting of the country’s Prime Minister—was a break from the norm would be an understatement. Later that year she made headlines

JENNI CARTER, DEL KATHRYN BARTON, ALBERTZ BENDA, NEW YORK, AND ARNDT ART AGENCY A3, BERLIN

DEL KATHRYN BARTON



Helmke, Juliet. "Dazzling Facets," *Modern Painters*. July 2017.

albertz benda

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001
tel 212.244.2579 | www.albertzbenda.com



Meeting the Future With Love, left, and My Fruits of Love, right, both 2008. Watercolor, gouache, and ink on hot pressed paper, 32¼ x 24½ in. each.

again, but this time in a public furor when conservative corners of the country, and the media, objected to a sexually explicit body of work that was included in the group exhibition “Optimism” at Brisbane’s state-funded Gallery of Modern Art. The exhibition’s premise was to look at the human ways of expressing “hope, energy, passion, and playfulness.” The series, *I am flesh again*, featured male and female genitalia, as well as other delicately drawn body parts like eyes, hands, and breasts, along with abstract organic shapes, and surprising juxtapositions of all of these forms. It was labeled obscene. “All of a sudden I’d ended up on the front page of the newspaper for X-rated art and was being called ‘morally unfit to be a mother,’” Barton says.

She, along with the curator Julie

Ewington (and a large portion of the public who saw and championed her contribution), was shocked at the reaction. The works were in a separate room, with a sign advising of their sexual nature. Like any graphic movie or television show, viewers had a choice to consume. With simple pencil lines and occasional splashes of watery color, the series has a shock factor, yes, but is often more perplexing—maybe even humorous at times—with Barton’s obscure amalgamations. (The large pineapple balls dangling beneath an erect penis, themselves dotted with tiny vulvas, hardly seem menacing.) Yet the series as a whole also comes across as deeply sensual. It was included in the show because, as Barton recalls Ewington saying to her at the time, “How can we have a show about optimism that *doesn’t* have sex in it?”

DEL KATHRYN BARTON

DEL KATHRYN BARTON



i will tell you where to turn, 2017. Acrylic and enamel on linen, 31½ x 39½ in.

Helmke, Juliet. "Dazzling Facets," *Modern Painters*. July 2017.

albertz benda

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001
tel 212.244.2579 | www.albertzbenda.com

are you a bunny –
a real live girl, 2017.
Acrylic on French
linen, 78¾ x 71 in.



JENNI CARTER, DEL KATHRYN BARTON, ALBERTZ BENDA, AND ARNDT ART AGENCY A3

Nevertheless, the controversy did not deter the crowds—numbers swelled with the publicity.

The allure of *I am flesh again* is its ability to encompass these apparent contrasts: serious but also whimsical, highly sexual yet somehow innocent through its portrayal of the human body with a sense of wide-eyed curiosity. Barton will show the work again for the first time in an upcoming career retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, opening November 17, and perhaps within the context of a larger body of her work it might be easier for audiences to appreciate this thread that runs throughout her oeuvre: one where apparent contradictions are able to be held within the same frame.

For her first solo show in New York City, “r u a bunny?” opening June 1 at Albertz Benda, Barton will present 10 new paintings. In the painting from which the exhibition title is taken, a bare-breasted young woman sporting only Elizabethan ruffs and a crown of leaves gives perch to a sitting hare. The imagery finds its roots in Barton’s childhood, when she moved to an eccentric property from inner Sydney as a six-year-old, and her formative experiences of communing with nature. “Living on the land was fairly new for my parents, and I think they certainly underestimated the work involved—my father rebuilding the house and my mother gardening and raising animals while also maintaining a full-time teaching job.” Learning from her parents, Barton formed a relationship with the land rooted in respect, but also a kind of “deep, playful lack of responsibility,” she says. “It was about pleasure—watching goats give birth and picking apricots.”

The whimsical, inquisitive title, however, comes from a daily routine that revolves around her two dogs, Magic Dog and Cherry Bomb. The latter, she describes lovingly, is “this wretched French Bulldog. She’s fierce and nasty but is also absolutely my soul mate. I’m devoted to her.” Cherry Bomb joins her in the studio most days, and every once in a while the artist will look over to the curious, complicated furry face with its outsized ears and ask her, “are you

“YES, WE NEED TO
BE RESILIENT. YES,
WE NEED TO BE
WARRIORS AT
WHATEVER POINT,
BUT WE CAN ALSO
DERIVE POWER
FROM BEING
CONSCIOUSLY
VULNERABLE IN
THE WORLD.”

a bunny?”—the kind of small absurdity that many pet-devotees can relate to. “Often my titles are very meaningful and considered,” she says, but in this case, it is and it isn’t. “On one level it means a lot to me but on another level it’s just sort of an irreverent, kind of playful little murmur that you whisper in your lover’s ear.”

Within the imagery of *r u a bunny*, there’s a palpable sense of encounter between the rabbit and the female protagonist. They are presented to viewers in Barton’s extremely embellished style (“I do have an unashamedly decorative aesthetic.”) yet the woman wears a serious, contemplative face. “There’s an innocence to her,” Barton says, “but, at the same time, an acknowledgement of the *knowingness* that can come from an innocent consciousness.” She likens that to the way young children will occasionally sprout profound declarations borne out of guileless observation. And, like the other works on view at Albertz Benda, the piece probes at this young protagonist’s womanhood. Her bared breasts, her stance, the expression she wears—“I wanted her to be kind of vulnerable yet strong simultaneously,”

Barton says. “And I do think that’s part of women’s power. Yes, we need to be resilient. Yes, we need to be warriors at whatever point, but we can also derive power from being consciously vulnerable in the world.”

Among all these references and backstories, one finds the compelling nature of any Barton work: its ability to touch on the universal and personal; the sensual and innocent; the serious and silly, through a simple image rendered in agonizingly patterned, bedazzling detail.

Albertz Benda will also play host to the U.S. premiere of the artist’s second short film—a medium Barton began experimenting with around 2012. *Red* features Cate Blanchett in the main role as the human personification of a female redback spider. It is the artist’s first foray into live action—her previous work, a visual adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s *The Nightingale and the Rose* with Geoffrey Rush and Mia Wasikowska voicing the main characters, featured the artist’s animated illustrations. And she calls herself infatuated with the art form, though certainly her introduction has come with significant star-wattage.

In *Red*, Blanchett howls, writhes, and strips down to an outfit of layered fishnets by cutting an Armani suit from her body. Soon, like the redback, we see her killing her lover during the process of mating, an act that leads to the birth of her child. The film is an allegory for one of Barton’s recurring themes—unapologetic female power—and casting Blanchett was a dream for her. “In thinking about the character of ‘mother’ for me it was sort of a no-brainer. Cate Blanchett, as an artist and as a working mother, just seems to naturally embody all the qualities I think a mother has.” It seems clear, however, that working with film might be a change in tack but not in destination for the artist. “I’m always hungry to work across new mediums,” she says, having just secured funding to develop her first full-length feature. But from the paintings to the drawings to film, a thread runs through. “Interrogating and celebrating and questioning the poetics of what it means to inhabit a female body,” as she puts it, will probably always be a line of inquisition. MP

Helmke, Juliet. "Dazzling Facets," *Modern Painters*. July 2017.

albertz benda

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001
tel 212.244.2579 | www.albertzbenda.com