

The Art of Annette Bezor

Since the 1980s, Annette Bezor has been one of Australia's foremost painters. In her current work, she takes images of women from classical painting, contemporary decorative art and popular culture and recreates them as stylised icons to reveal and subvert the power and impact of the originals. In challenging viewers to meet the newly focussed gaze of these women, Bezor exposes the nature of society's attitudes to women and how they are represented in art and popular culture. She then situates these iconic figures in a surrealistic space to emphasise the roles, identities and emotional states of women generally.



Entanglement-Complicity, acrylic/oil on canvas. 180 x 280 cm. 2010

Her work is predicated on the assumption that personal identity and roles are, at least in part, culturally determined — we are products of our society. But she also believes that identity, thoughts, feelings, desires and sexuality run deeper than social programming. People are products of both socio-cultural and biological processes. These processes conflict with each other and create a degree of tension within individuals that depends on their circumstances. In various societies, at various times in history, these competing pressures produce quite different kinds of social constructs. These social constructs are reflected in the art of those societies, and Bezor re-employs that art as an analytical tool to reconsider contemporary mores and values.

Bezor uses a range of painting techniques to support her analysis. Her *Entanglement* series of paintings (c1989-2011) are typically composites of several original and appropriated images located in a contrasting, expressionistic ground.

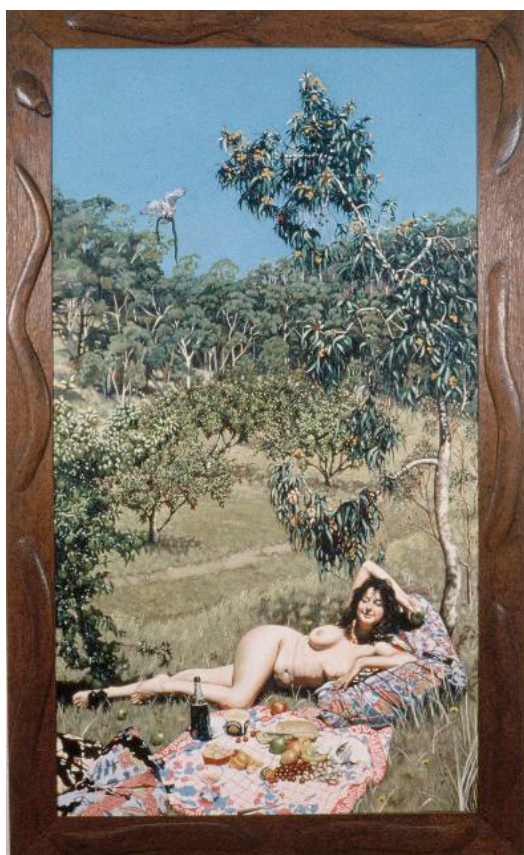
The resulting visual construct becomes a metaphor for the construction of identity. *Entanglement-Complicity* (2010), for example, clashes images of a Madonna and Child with Japanese Geisha and the classical art nude — three archetypal roles traditionally assigned to women in male-dominated societies — and the figures look as if they are emerging from a maelstrom.



Lookers, acrylic/oil on canvas. 165 x 165 cm. 2011

Her work can be categorised as postmodern by virtue of her appropriation of imagery and reconsideration of past art, but these strategies are intended to address the representation of women and women's sexuality as much as the nature or history of art itself. And while the painting techniques she uses question the nature of painting as an art form, they are primarily used to create powerful metaphors.

In *Lookers* (2011), for example, the underpainting shows through the surface and appears physically ravaged, so that the pretty faces painted over the top appear damaged. The resulting imagery alludes to the superficial nature of beauty and suggests the inevitability and actuality of aging and deterioration.

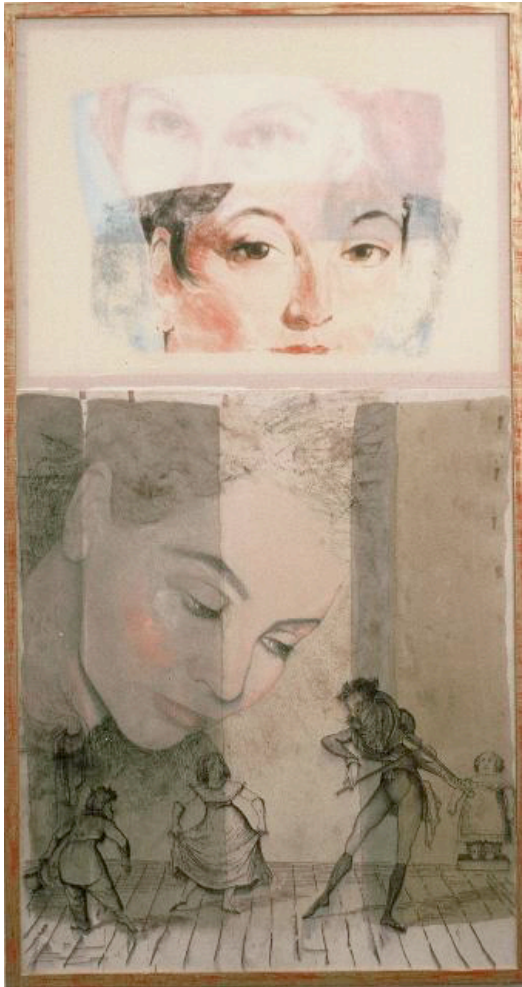


The Snake is Dead, oil on canvas, 175 x 130 cm. 1981

In the 1980s, Bezor's work resonated with the feminist reconsideration of art, with landscape art and with performance or body art, and frequently used the device of placing the female subject in settings atypical of modernist or classical approaches. Her early work was often realist in form, and she thus entered and revitalised traditionally male-dominated artistic territory. Paintings like *The Snake is Dead* (1981) suggested a radically different view of women in terms of their role, their subjectivity, the depiction of them, and the role of the artist. Two of the abiding themes in her painting can be seen to have been the feminist concern with the body and with the male gaze and its objectification of the female.¹

In addition to addressing Australia's tradition of landscape art, *The Snake is Dead* depicts the subject in a pose recalling classical nudes such as Goya's *Maja* and Titian's *Venus d'Urbino*. But, as Richard Grayson suggests, it turns the idea upside down — the woman here is not the sexual object/ model of the

¹ The word 'gaze' here refers to the directional look of the viewer, and is typically associated with the male view of the female subject.



Insatiate Desires 2, acrylic/oil/ink on fabric. 300 x 150 cm. 1995



Intercourse 1, oil on fabric. 70 x 70 cm. 1990

male artist.² Nor is this painting, while suggesting erotic pleasure, itself erotic. The second, lipstick-marked wine glass in the foreground suggests another female picnicker, perhaps a viewer (the artist?) engaged on an equal footing with her in the event. The peregrine falcon overhead, fleeing with the snake, symbolises the castration of the male view, as well as the flight from Eden of the seducing serpent. In one work, Bezor thus inverted central assumptions underpinning centuries of Western art. She also reclaims women's sexuality, the visual expression of which had for so long been appropriated by men.

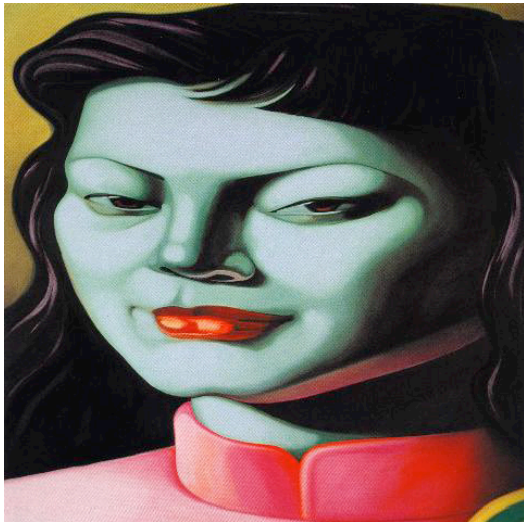
Since the late 1980s, Bezor has frequently used the canvas as a metaphor for the body and mind. For example, her *Insatiate Desires 2* (1995) includes a self-portrait superimposed in outline form 'overlooking' an appropriated drawing. Above these images are two other images of female faces, one of them Ingres' *Mlle Rivière*, and the whole work resembles a series of stains on the canvas, as if these events or individuals have left the mark of their existence as a record. The work has a dream-like quality, as if the artist is fantasising.

Bezor sometimes employed the idea of the canvas as a record stained with or by the characters depicted, as is suggested by *Intercourse 2* (1990). In some early works she used mattress ticking instead of canvas, directly referring to the bed as the site of action, and indicating that what is being recorded is the passion of the character depicted. In so doing, she moved away from perspectival construction towards layered panels of imagery that defeat the representation of depth of field and deny the viewer's location in a space related to the action.

Bezor's picture space became a theatre of the mind, the viewer being provoked to engage with the imagery rather than to participate imaginatively in a realistic narrative.

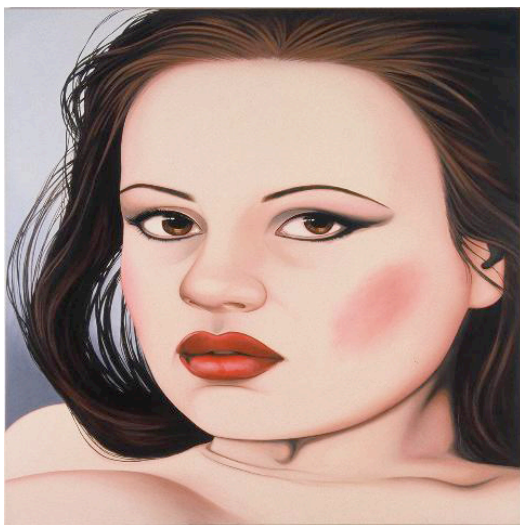
² Richard Grayson, *A Passionate Gaze*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2000, p. 4.

During the 1990s, Bezor's work showed an increasing concern with the depiction of women in contemporary media, and with the ubiquity and impersonality of contemporary media such as magazines. She addressed these issues through her choice of subject matter and through the form of her work.



Tension 3, oil on canvas. 165 x 165 cm. 1999

The images in the *Tension* series (for example *Tension 3*, 1999) are painted with shading to suggest three-dimensional form, but also appear flat, as if the shading is stylized, represented as itself rather than used to create an illusory effect. She painted multiple versions of the one painting, addressing the issue of repetition both to challenge ideas of authenticity and to mimic the replicability of images in contemporary society. Used repeatedly and shown in groups, either as original paintings or as laser scans, these faces became symbols or motifs. She replicated them in different tones, identifying the important signifiers, and also rendering them banal — deliberately saturating the viewer with imagery to trivialise the image and so shift the meaning again.



Smoulder 2, oil on canvas. 165 x 165 cm. 2000

In her *Smoulder* series, begun around 2000, Bezor extended the techniques and ideas in the *Tension* series to address pornography. The 'subject' of *Smoulder 1* (2000) is appropriated from pornographic magazine imagery. Here, the woman's body, which is central to pornography, has been deleted, and we see only the face.

This image is an index to the image of a body rather than an actual body, and the (imagined) image of the body is in turn an index to the subject matter, that is, the fantasised sexual encounter. Rather than painting the 'prostitute' from life, as might have been the Nineteenth Century Parisian modernist's approach, Bezor has painted a contemporary version of the

subject filtered by contemporary media and mores. The work thus functions on many levels — as a portrait (of an anonymous subject); as an index to the pornographic image; as an index to and comment on the painting of women as desirable objects; as a comment on the return of the gaze; and as a representation of woman in extremis, the viewer's 'victim'.

In Griselda Pollock's terms, this painting reframes the 'sexual politics of looking.'³

³ Pollock discusses the question of whether women artists such as Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt can be complicit in reinforcing a male way of viewing, thus reinforcing female passivity, and goes on to discuss the reworking of feminine space and the gaze. (Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference—Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art*, Routledge, London, 1988, p. 87.) Bezor reworks the gaze and the spaces of femininity.

The reworking of femininity in the *Smoulder* series is by way of the deletion of the body to deny the traditional male gaze. It also lies in the choice of a subject whose facial expression conveys a mixture of fear and sexual ardour, attesting to the frequency of ambivalent feelings in personal relationships. The *Smoulder* series establishes a form of pop art that appropriates and reconsiders imagery from popular culture. Where male painters of bygone eras represented women in ways that objectified them, Bezor bestows subjectivity on her 'models', confronting the viewer's voyeuristic monopoly of erotic response. She represents the passions these women feel, and how these passions give rise to social and sexual activity. In place of images that induce sexual passions in the viewer, the passions are themselves represented, denying the viewer's potentially erotic response, but acknowledging the power and presence of human sexuality.



Face Value 4, oil on canvas. 140 x 140 cm. 2010

More recently, her strategy in the *Face Value* series (c2010-2011) is to caricature models who pose for her or images of women from popular culture — for example, the “Asian” figures in this series have been given blue eyes and red hair — and overlay them with translucent bands of colour to mask their characters and turn their portraits into abstract paintings. This challenge to the nature of painting and its categorisation in formal terms is intended to support the challenge to the categorisation of women in terms of ethnic and cultural identity, as well as to remind viewers that women are still so often regarded as merely decorative objects.



The Silent Violence, acrylic/oil on canvas. 165 x 165 cm. 2011

In *The Silent Violence* (2011), one of a series entitled *Silent Violent* (2009-2011), Bezor exaggerates the superficial prettiness of the Geisha by stylising the figures and posing them with flowers and goldfish. The women appear in close contact but their intimacy is circumscribed by the manners of their culture. Their gaze is inward and they are disconnected — emblematic and untouchable. Ultimately, they must be silent, though their mask-like expressions betray suppressed emotion.

The concept of beauty evident in *The Silent Violence* has parallels in all societies. Bezor says her work is, “representative of a psychological and emotional space that people inhabit but are silent about. We all have this — a passive exterior, inside which is a Pandora’s

box.”⁴ She believes that, in being taught to behave according to the rules of our society, we submerge our deepest feelings beneath a civilised façade, even to the extent that we are unable to recognise our own turbulent inner states and the damage we do to ourselves and others.

Annette Bezor’s work establishes an alternative psycho-social space in which the appropriation of imagery prompts the re-evaluation of the cultural power and significance of that imagery. She has adapted painting in unique ways to suit her purpose and, over her career, has confirmed and extended the role of the independent woman artist and has participated in the debate over art history. Bezor has made a significant impact on the idea and nature of painting in contemporary art.

Chris Reid ©

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Bibliography

Richard Grayson, *A Passionate Gaze*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2000

Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference—Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art*, Routledge, London, 1988

⁴ Annette Bezor, in conversation with the author, 2010.