

The gaze of Medusa

Medusa's gaze.

Make no mistake, Medusa was the first, the most efficient practitioner of that most demonic and deadly of arts, photography – her cave littered with the frozen images of those who gazed upon her, she saw but could not be seen; photography is indeed the most captivating, the most possessive of gazes.

What does it mean to 'capture' the image of one's parents? And what does it mean to repeatedly capture it, then cut up these frozen faces carefully, obsessively, lovingly with a scalpel and display them on the wall of a gallery? A kind of grisly homage, a shrine even, to possession – a bittersweet love song hung on a wall, with all the obsessive love and undercurrents of pain, angst and suffering of every great pop tune whose melody haunts us.

The castration blues.

The song sung here though is a song of castration (pull up a chair, Herr Freud, you know this tune), a song sung by Oedipus and Electra; those destroyers of parents who attempt to circumvent the natural order and fully possess their elders.

The fear of castration is supposed to prevent this, to push the child away and into the larger symbolic world, but Khamara gets there first with her scalpel, turns her parents into symbols, literally creates a world out of them on the wall, uses them to fulfil her desires as an artist. It's the full Greek Tragedy, the full Freudian trope: Medusa, Oedipus, Electra, (perhaps Hydra is invoked too – no matter how often Khamara cuts their heads off, her quest for freedom from parental authority figures is doomed, as they continue to grow new heads. It's Mater and Pater hung on the wall to dry, with Freud the Uber Father, the Uber Phallus, breathing heavily down the back of the artist's neck.

The face of the beast.

A 2005 self portrait shows the artist with her face hidden by a mask that invokes both fetishist rubber and New Guinean Mud men. It shields us from her terrible, fatal gaze that, like Medusa, like the sun, like the Real, like the camera, cannot be looked at without the destruction of the viewer. It's a

defiant, silent mask that wipes the face from the body, reconnects the head to the torso, makes it corporeal.

But there is no 'real' behind these parental death masks – no pulsing, straining animal, no beast of the forest, only the quiet, dry grimness of the face - signifiers floating horribly free of flesh ('a horror story. The face is a horror story,' mutters Deleuze into his shaving mirror). Not just any faces, but ones further burdened by representing the matriarch and patriarch – those who have (res)trained the artist from childhood, locked her beast behind the face of the good daughter

Medusa's couch.

Freud's Medusa is the castrator, the embodiment of the fearful women terrifying and destroying men.

The photographer is the capturer of souls, the reducer of bodies to flatness, to surface - the exposé of others to the deadening gaze. The artist plays out this trope fully, pushes the limits of destruction and manipulation of image. Somehow the careful and repeated cutting out of the face articulates the captured status of the subject, focuses one on the power of the camera, of the gaze, of the unseen photographer.

Make of this what you will...it is perhaps easy to read too much Freud into art, just as Freud himself perhaps read too many of his own phobias and fetishes into other's dreams.

Myths and Legends.

Any animist (or Buffy fan) will tell you, the gods can be dangerous and obscene. If Khamara's work echoes the myths of ancient gods, then the gods this work reminds you of are altogether more human, more animal and more excessive than modern gods, filled with lust, anger, violence, vulgarity, obscenity, they embody basic, powerful drives that monotheistic religions and societies try to deny and suppress.

Khamara offers us just such obscenity, brutal yet perversely funny, animated by the precision of the artist's scalpel. There is a (pleasing) vulgarity and honesty that adds for me echoes of my favourite photographic experiments coming from the surrealist movement, with the simplicity of their cut and paste technique.

Eye, eye, nose, nose, nose.

I show images of Khamara's work to my two year old... She points with delight at the multiple faces. 'Eye' she says, then 'Eye, eye, eye', studiously and solemnly notating every eye, every nose, every eyebrow. It is the face as seen through the eyes of a toddler: the face exploded - all component parts, equal in importance, that never quite cement into a whole, a face, an 'I', but are nevertheless endlessly fascinating – an 'in the middle of the mirror stage' reading of the art.

She moves on to the teddy she is clutching, beginning to catalogue his face (eye, eye, ear, ear, nose, teeth...). Everything is a signifier, every bit of image has an associated name and meaning, but none are quite properly attached yet – nothing is entirely real or unreal, a drawing of a nose as real as my nose, as teddy's, as unreal as her own nose.

Khamara's cut up bodies are somehow like this – more obviously two dimensional and absurd in being cut out and stuck together, yet also seen anew, refreshed in their decapitation. These images empty the 'I' but not the eye - layering meaning, patterning, rhythm, as they strip back ego and identity, fogging up the mirror. The excess of imagery, of body parts builds up into something both carnal and funny - they stink of bodies but also exhibit lightness, playfulness.

It is perhaps all a kind of ancient curse that the artist casts on herself, chained to her studio late at night, endlessly cutting the same faces, the same bodies.

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