

The gaze of Medusa

– Notes on Justine Khamara's *Legion* at TCB.

As I enter the space four photographic collages confront me, one on each wall of the gallery. The largest is *legion*, a circle composed of cut out photos of a man's head. Shot at different angles – from full face through to side on – to create the illusion of a sphere, the faces are curiously earless.

Double V - two delicate fans of arms set out slightly from the wall - immediately conjures images of snakes, and Indian gods and that culture's tradition of miniature painting in their delicateness. They become more subversive when I notice the display of underarm hair and the aggressive digital gestures (one group of hands giving the victory or perhaps peace sign, the hands in the other group reversed to present a more defiant gesture).

On the opposite wall in a small self-portrait the artist's arm is raised in a similar pose, but now, with body attached, seems to address the gesture more defiantly and aggressively at the viewer. A roughly drawn black mask, invoking both fetishist rubber and New Guinean mud man, has covered the artist's face. This work has none of the spectacular, time consuming complicatedness of the first two pieces, but an unsettling power that fascinates me.

A small triptych – a delicate portrait of the man whose face features in *legion*, each image a ghostly series of blurred layers of movement – completes the exhibition. It is the quietest piece, but on close inspection it both contrasts with and illuminates the sphere of heads, just as the self-portrait and the fans of the artist's arms play off and inform one another.

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 a man? 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.

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. And when the artist is shown in self portrait her face is hidden by a mask, shielding us from her terrible, fatal gaze, that like Medusa, like the sun, like the camera, cannot be looked at without the destruction of the viewer.

Medusa's couch.

Freud's Medusa is the castrator, the embodiment of the fearful women terrifying and destroying men (Medusa herself is of course eventually 'castrated' – decapitated by Perseus who has been made invisible and thus unable to be gazed upon by the monster - in the kind of rough justice traditionally meted out by patriarchal heroes).

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, and sits herself on the wall defiantly gesturing into the room, watching her victim.

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.

A bucket of arms.

All those decapitated heads, all those disconnected arms...

A life-drawing lecturer of mine was once offered (rather casually) by a nursing lecturer a bucket of arms for the class to draw. The most alarming part was the offhandedness of the offer, as if they had some spare buckets of arms just lying around. Khamara offers us this bucket – obscene, brutal yet perversely funny, animated by the precision of the artist's scalpel.

Obscenity of the Gods.

If the fanning groups of hands are redolent of gods, then these are obscene gods, dangerous gods. As any animist (or Buffy fan) will tell you, the gods

can be dangerous and obscene. 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, they embody basic, powerful drives that monotheistic religions and societies try to deny and suppress.

Hair.

We live in a curiously hairless culture, so much so that the visible bodies of men as much as women are smooth and depilated, so much so that Brazilian waxing has become an astute career choice. One has only to look at early C20th nude photos to realise how tastes have changed.

A fundamentalist Christian (and female) friend tells me underarm hair on women is obscene; I silently wonder what her god was thinking of when he put it there.

Regardless of personal preferences, such a brazen display of underarm hair as is present both in the collections of arms and the self-portrait has a certain shock value, a (pleasing) vulgarity and honesty that mirrors rather succinctly the hands' gestures, and adds for me echoes of my favourite photographic experiments coming from the surrealist movement.

On the couch with M again.

All those writhing snakes atop Medusa's scalp seem to represent to Freud the horror of female pubic hair. More specifically this is the fear of castration that the sight of the 'penis deficient' female crotch brings on for the male, but the fear is transferred to hair, and the sight of Medusa's snake coiffure is the most dreadful and dangerous. Certainly the serpentine gestures of *Double V* bring to mind the sheer otherness of both South East Asian dance and the horror of a nest of vipers that may or may not be Freudian in origin.

Possibly the great psychiatrist would himself have favoured our current hair removal trends, although Freud himself, I seem to remember, sported a rather large amount of facial hair presumably without seeing horror in the mirror every morning.

Eye, eye, nose, nose, nose.

I show the images on the computer 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. *Legion* 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.

Repetition, repetition.

Repetition and multiples – the last refuge of fools and eighties installation artists, a kind of art school 'look at all the work I did' aesthetic that works to empty the content, mask the author (Warhol turning images and viewer's brains to jelly through endless repeats, sameness and otherness all in one).

But Khamara's images empty the 'I', 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.

Medusa, Medusa.

For all the pain Medusa inflicts, she suffers too: once a beautiful maiden she is transformed by the jealous goddess Minerva into a picture of hideousness, into an embodiment of the fatal gaze.

I'm drawn back again and again to the small image of the artist – that defiant arm and the silence of that black mask that wipes the face from the body, ritually reconnects the head to the torso, makes the artist so much more animated, corporeal. Those she sees suffer the opposite fate, reduced to facial surface – signifiers floating horribly free of flesh – their portraits (literally) more superficial, their physicality lost in the camera somewhere.

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