

Princess Mysteries

*In this new body of work, **Princess Mysteries**, Medicine Hat artist Deborah Forbes layers and arranges myriad images from varied sources: tabloid photographs, art historical icons, documentary images, compositions created digitally via computers and scanners, transparencies and silhouettes. The work is complex, fluid and rich, and raises many questions, as indeed, it is meant to. Since Deborah is an artist who takes an inquisitive and investigative approach to her work, I posed a series of questions to her regarding the new work, in lieu of an essay or interview. Her responses below are considered, insightful and thought-provoking; I thank her for them and for preparing an exciting and challenging body of work for this exhibition. Joanne Marion, Curator*

Who are the 'princesses'?

The three 'princesses' I am using are the Infanta Margarita from the 17th century painting by Diego de Silva Velasquez; tabloid images of the murdered child beauty pageant princess, JonBenet Ramsey; and 'the Kandahar girl' - a little Muslim girl from a news photo from the recent war in Afghanistan. I have been working with the Infanta Margarita since 1999 and have completed two bodies of work with her at the centre (*Infanta Project: Series I and II*).

The 'princess' in myth and legend is usually "as beautiful as she is



good"; is often very clever, and is able to make her way through numerous trials and tests to ultimately take her rightful and exalted place as a powerful and full human being. She is sometimes saved by the prince, sometimes assists the prince in an essential way, but often makes it through the trials on the merit of her own wits. This idea of 'princess' is a cross-cultural, cross-historical theme. It exists at the same time, in fact, as females have been kept in positions of arrested power. How do these two positions exist together? Why do our stories tell us one thing and our actions show another?

When I started to work with the Infanta, it was with an iconic image of 'princess' that has endured and influenced for 350 years. It continues into the present in Disney movies and even the disquieting world of child beauty pageants. Early in my work with the Infanta, I would see JonBenet Ramsey's face projected onto the face of the Infanta and I knew that eventually they would have to merge in some way. The 'Kandahar girl' came more recently; as soon as I saw that news photo, I knew that she was the third sister princess.

What is the importance of the girls' costume in determining identity - and the shifting and changing of those costumes by you?

On a regular basis over many years I have asked five year olds to draw a princess. Most often they will draw a girl with long hair and a long 'pouffy' dress. The dress, more often than not, resembles the farthingale dress of the Infanta Margarita. The princess costume is an icon. When an icon enters the collective unconscious of a culture and sticks, it does so for reasons. The princess has been Disneyfied, entrenched in the ritual costuming of Halloween, has made its way into christening dresses, first communion dresses, flower girl dresses, party dresses, child beauty pageant gowns. Costume tells stories of its time. Why have we sworn allegiance to an archaic, restrictive princess dress for ceremonial purposes? Why is there a collective gasp of, "Ahhhhh," when we see a little girl done up in this way? I, too, am enchanted with this image of power and innocence.

Little girls in western and eastern cultures become "figment(s) of someone else's imagination".¹ In the west we sell them girl toys that are pink, mauve and pretty, dress them as cupcakes for special occasions, and in extreme cases, market them as "preening baby geishas"² in child beauty pageants. In fundamentalist Islamic countries little girls are draped in yards of fabric to protect them from the "snakes and daggers of men's gaze".³ Before puberty they are often 'bagged' entirely and live with severe restrictions of their freedoms.

These seem like two different kinds of societal behaviours but in both situations the result is "the confiscation of one individual's life by another".⁴ In blurring the boundaries of the individual identities of the girls through the projections in *Princess Mysteries*, I am

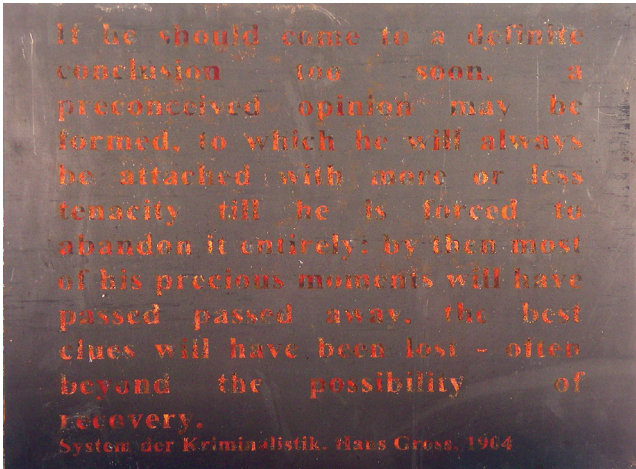


attempting to investigate in some manner of general abduction of early female identity.

What are some of the mysteries you refer to, in the title and the text excerpts which are etched in rust on the steel floor panels?

In my earlier work, the *Infanta Project: Series I and II*, the physical processes of time, transformation, decomposition, and alteration of matter ran alongside the historical and literary investigation of ideas. For these reasons I was entranced by Hans Gross' writing about criminal investigation in System der Kriminalistik (1904).⁵ The process he describes speaks so clearly to how I puzzle through my work. He writes of the investigation of physical evidence, conceptual matters, and the dangers of bias and presumptive conclusions. The quotations from Gross that I have used in the rusted steel text plaques in *Princess Mysteries*, address the condition of investigator/scientist/artist as observer; they entreat one to hold off coming to conclusions – to look not at the lie but to look at the “the motive for the lie.” By suspending my judgments and allowing myself to follow rather than lead investigations in my work, I end up working with the questions and ideas with which I need to work. The work is not a polemic.

A mystery is something that enshrouds itself. Sometimes a mystery remains unsolved because of a collective will to keep it a mystery. Some of the *Princess Mysteries*: Why do we seek to control the life power of little girls? What is the role of ideology, religion, consumerism in raising little girls? Who or what determines these girls' identities: their parents, the political and economic realities of the times, the media? Why does the mystery run so deep? How are we all complicit in it?



In *Princess Mysteries*, the 'mysteries' allude to the investigation of the function of the idea of the 'princess' in contemporary culture, to the historical underpinnings of that idea, and also to the unsolved mystery of JonBenet's death.

In the past you have created prints, or used physical layering of images in some way: what does this new approach, using projected images, allow you to do?

The pieces in *Princess Mysteries* are literally projections (DVD and overhead). By using these means I am able to work with visual ideas that have fluidity and flexibility but that consist only of light. The images can be reconfigured in many ways and disappear when the machines go off. Figuratively, the images are, as Nafisi suggests, projections of "someone else's imagination."

The projections endeavour to create layers of dialogue between past/present, physical evidence/metaphorical evidence, truth/lies and to draw attention to the oblique layering, fusing and confusing we do with all of this in our minds.

1. Nafisi, Azar. Reading Lolita in Tehran, A Memoir in Books. New York: Random House 2003, p. 25.

2. Paglia, Camille. Why We Leer at JonBenet. September, 1997. Salon/Camille Paglia (website). December 2000.

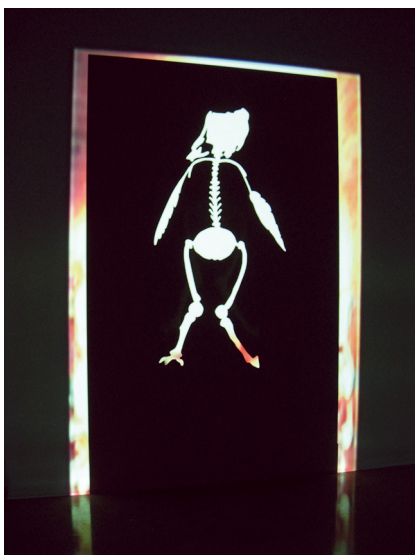
3. Nafisi, Azar. Interview with Michael Enright. The Sunday Edition. CBC Radio One. Toronto. October 12, 2003.

4. Nafisi, Azar. Reading Lolita in Tehran p. 33.

5. Gross, Hans. System der Kriminalistik. Ed. 1904. Criminal Investigation: A Practical Textbook for Magistrates, Police Officers and Lawyers. Sweet & Maxwell Ltd., translated by J. Adam from the original Gross, H. System Der Kriminalistik. 1891. Publication date: May 1924. Quoted in Shields, Jody. The Fig Eater. Boston: Little Brown, 2000.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Deborah Forbes is an artist and instructor of Art Education and Art History at Medicine Hat College, Medicine Hat, Alberta. She studied at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts School, John Abbott College, Sir George Williams University and with Archie Brennan in Edinburgh, Scotland. Her work has been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions in western Canada, Ontario and Quebec. She is the recipient of numerous provincial and federal grants and awards in the arts. Her work is held in public, private and corporate collections in Canada and the United States, including the Alberta Foundation for the Arts and the Canadian Textile Institute, Montreal.



All images are installation details of *Princess Mysteries*, steel, dvd projection, overhead projection of transparencies dimensions variable, 2003

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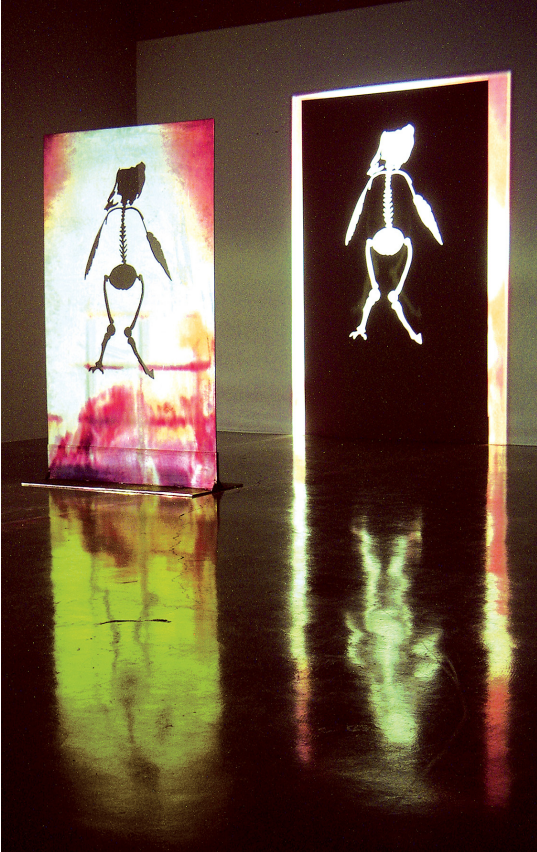


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PRINCESS MYSTERIES



December 6, 2003 - January 18, 2004

Opening Reception
Friday, December 5, 6.30 pm

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