

Peter Milne

Personal Hygiene

Once upon a time... or as the chimp paints it, after Luis Bunuel, “Il etait une fois...” Knowing Peter’s work as intimately as I think I do, I was surprised by the economy of the catalogue notes that accompany this exhibition (not that for a minute I’m suggesting that he is unnecessarily wordy). Peter tells us in exactly 111 words that, on deliriously waking from the ordeal of his illness and its aftermath, he had to invent false memories for himself in the absence of real ones. It is a mistake to think that this is a work of pathos and melancholy, since Peter, thankfully, is no self-pitying, whinging sook or goody-goody. Unless, of course, that rhythm of feeling captures the deep aesthetic regret of reality failing to live up to his expectation of what *should have been*. So in photomedia as in other forms of art practice, when reality fails, invention prevails. And it is Peter’s response to this miserable impasse that expresses the hilarious, pie in the face slapstick of *Personal Hygiene*.

These image sequences are the wonderful fictional-dream-writing of Peter’s experience with the Big C rather than a Type-C. And as we would expect of Peter they are wonderfully erudite. He understands the workings of the Freudian unconscious as well as the journey of excrement. Here we find the *condensation* of images of illness and sickness (Rowland S. Howard, some guy on stilts with a mutant baby), of shocking misery (children with colostomy bags), parts of the body we never want to see or know about (inside the bowel), and the appalling exercise of

power out his control (Jeff Kennett, the Ku Klux Klan, the Brotherhood of Freemasons and the preposterously camp Frank Thring as the terrifyingly camp King Herod from *King of Kings*).

But more weirdly, and this is the vivid and shocking poetry of Peter's work, we see the *displacement* of the facts of his experience into anally associated paired figures: the ambivalent Don Dunstan and an unidentified girl, Gilbert and George, Will Robinson and Doctor Smith. With so much anal action going on, I bet you're all wondering what all these visual shenanigans sound like? Not a fart or a groan or a whimper. Nothing so banal. This is a show by Peter Milne, not Benny Hill, or Tom of Finland. Rather, imagine television's most verbose, secret chimp, Lancelot Link, had cancer of the testicles. You can hear him carping on and on to Mata for an entire episode about having a lump in his lunch that she won't believe. Mata shrugs, takes a slug from a bottle of gin, says "meh" to the camera and falls down dead drunk. The laugh track takes us uproariously to the ad break.

Personal Hygiene is far from being an autobiographical work. It is rather Peter's autograph of a specific time and place of an unreal vulnerability, the horrible realisation of *what has been*; that is, the experience of watching himself reading a book on "Improving Bowel Function after Bowel Surgery". The most literal, though less interesting metaphor of the dread of having to possess this text of "practical advice" is the fetish of "clever" chimps that can paint, wear clothes, talk *and* take a dump on the dunny. But there is also the sinister, post-apocalyptic landscapes in

which deformed humans, animal vivisection and bowel surgery bleed cheek by blistering jowl into rough images of penetrative invasiveness. But don't be fooled by any of the benevolent medical imagery you see here. Sure there's a nurse, bandages and lots of toilet roll, but how do you account for the uncomfortable presence of Zig and Zag?

There is humiliation here, but there is also pleasure and pain. While the tortured OncoMouse watches lugubriously throughout each image, a perversely ambiguous Mick Jagger pouts and poses with heavy metal. But it is in an unassuming meta-text that we see the most chilling autographical insight into the artist's experience, a loaded image that passes itself off as a launch invite. In a work about this work, a vamping Marilyn Monroe, all tits and 1950s couture, seductively escorts an agro chimp who knows where. Beating its fist defiantly, it is at once a primate Marquis of Queensbury as well as some thug dancing at a Coloured Balls concert. But in the dream-worked fakery of these recovered memories, this invitational image is another variation of those abject, paired figures. This apparently playful and innocuous piece of ephemera that advertises the main event is perhaps the most literal and urgent iconography of *Personal Hygiene*. This is not Marilyn the gold-digger Pola Debevoise from *How to Marry A Millionaire*, but the mutant avatar of a drowsy nurse, cajoling her agitated patient into the colonic-maw of Luna Park to pass their first, uncomfortable stomatic bowel movement in days. Pissed off, the chimp knows that this is an impossible shit since, Dali-like, the colostomy bag has become a neck-kerchief. The sadness of this displacement may be scatological

whimsy, or Cathartic phantasmagoria in a dream. But the shocking realisation of this horror in waking life is an outrage to dignity.

In *Personal Hygiene* brutal reality and the madcap *On the Buses*-style weirdness of dreams twist and squirm in an uncomfortable tourniquet of fancy and horror. This pissed off chimp could be a surreal image of living in the seventies, of Moomba, Tarax lemonade, a Skyhooks concert at Bananas Disco in St Kilda, threatened by disreputable sharpies hanging around Luna Park. But the gaiety of its party hat can't distract Nurse Marilyn from knowing who and what she is really looking at. This ephemeral image is a symbol of the pity and terror, as well as the belly-laugh that just won't quit at the absurdity of it all. From the perspective of an artist and a clock-ticking carbon-based life-form, it represents the *vanitas* of quaint subject matter disguising the fucking mess; in this instance the artifice, with a nod to Samuel Beckett, of a bowtie on a throat cancer.

Darren Tofts, 2013