Gill Gatfield – 'Third Person'
28th April – 23rd May

Front Gallery

The exhibition Third Person enters the much maligned 'weird relic' of identity-art not as an exponent or as a critic, but as a contestant looking for more behind the fast shutting doors of this 'art of closed surface and of no depth' (1). Using the rubric 'I' and a slim concrete-art form, the works in glass and stone explore the terrain of identity discourse, potentially scouring a different landscape where authorship is more elastic and meaning less transparent.

In uniform, a group of three works, The Maquettes, march through the gallery. Soldiers, bearing the nom de plume of iconoclasts with transformative impact outside the originating disciplines - M. Le Blanc, Rrose Sélavy and Portia. Behind their masks lie deeper secrets about authorship, strategy and authenticity. Towards the light, the freestanding large glass I, Untitled, and the wall-hung Je suis, with a black I emerging out of the blue, reflect the gaze back into the discourse of identity art with its emphasis on heroes, prophets and activism. Je suis, French for 'I am', is a recombination of the letters 'I Jesus'.

With time, the monosyllabic forms may start to mouth more than essentialist statements. The edges between subject and object bleed, and the obvious becomes

obscure. Classical art mixes with new media, and philosophy with the ephemeral. The works give and take. Materials absorb and reflect. The idea that the artwork is looking back at both the artist and the spectator while being looked at, creates a locked-in, inescapable circle of merged identities. The independent object rises and presides over concerns about meaning.

The composition of the Third Person exhibition notice (2) indicates the unfolding and ambiguous nature of the work. Depicting the artist on a black I glass, the image has elements found also in Caravaggio's Narcissus (1597-1599) where a handsome youth looking into a dark pool falls in love with his own reflection. The artist in a glass factory on hands and knees, mounted and moving on the black glass, also builds a double figure and self-regarding loop, but without closure. The body, caught in movement, not posed, looks toward a 'reflection' that is man-made. Is the body in homage or prayer, and if so - to what: process, art, art history, science, philosophy? Is the body exerting force to keep the 'I' down or is the 'I' anchoring the body, 'downunder'? What happens when the anchor is lifted or the weight is removed? Does transference occur from body to text?

In filmmaking, the third person view refers to the technique of shooting film from a viewpoint outside any of the actors. This omniscient viewpoint incorporates the perspective of the set or scenery, and contextual elements, such as weather, light, shadow, and environment, in the composition. In English grammar, the third person refers to any person, object and context other than the present speaker or addressee. An expansion of time, space, character, and content occurs, affording a more reflective stance and potential for objectivity. Offsetting this remoteness is the element of identity that comes into play in the third person. The first person 'I', and the second person 'You', make way for the now identifiable third person - 'He, She, It, They', making gender (and gender neutrality) specific.

In art history, and especially religious art based on Christianity, the symbolism in painting and sculpture traditionally references the trinity of First Person - the Father (God), Second person - the Son (Jesus), and Third Person - the Holy Spirit. Controversial recent scholarship argues the trinity consists not of an anonymous Holy Ghost with the Father and Son, but Mary, Mother of Jesus as the Third Person, centralising the female sex in Christian theory.

The original character of Portia in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice assumed multiple identities: a male actor playing the part of a female character disguised as a male attorney. Female performers were seen as immoral at the time, a remnant from the Catholic Church's dominance in England. The Church believed at points in the Middle Ages that all non-spiritual theatrical productions were blasphemous. Faced with this obstacle, the Elizabethan acting company used young men and boys without beards, whose voices had not yet changed, to portray the parts of women. In addition to the complex identity of Portia, recent research revives doubts regarding the identity of the author William Shakespeare.

French mathematician, Sophie Germain, impersonated a male colleague (M. LeBlanc) to gain access to information and enter mathematics competitions. She undertook pioneering work in number theory and elasticity theory, winning the 'prix extraordinaire' from the Paris Academy of Sciences. She was not able to attend the Academy as women were excluded unless married to a member. Her death certificate lists her occupation as property holder, not mathematician.

In 1920 Marcel Duchamp created an alter-ego in the form of a woman whose name is an erotic pun (Rrose Sélavy) and whose work advanced and critiqued his own. When Duchamp's work was exhibited in Christchurch in 1967 two works, Fountain and Please Touch were withdrawn from public viewing - banned on the grounds of immorality (3). Works by Rrose Sélavy were exhibited.

(1) Leonhard Emmerling 'PLZKLME' (quote from Part IV), Conceptual Art Online,
www.imageandtext.org.nz/print_leonhard_plzklme.html

(2) Art New Zealand 133 Autumn 2010 (reproduced above)

(3) 'Councillor Bans Two Works from Duchamp Exhibition' Christchurch Press 26 July 1967

Gill Gatfield's innovative and thought-provoking practice defines an indeterminate space between sculpture and Conceptual Art. Her work is noteworthy for embracing both traditional sculptural media (stone, wood, glass) and more novel materials (grass, feathers, mirrors, pins, etc...), and for its tendency to set up intriguing juxtapositions - for example, between positive and negative forms or living and non-living materials. Extending and interrogating the formal possibilities of sculpture, Gatfield's Being-Made works of 2006-07 embraced the idea of art as in-process, occurring in an environment - transforming a space and being transformed in turn. In this way, her work undermines the notion of both supposedly autonomous and self-sufficient art-objects and observing, judging, ostensibly independent and impartial art-subjects.

In rendering ambiguous the relationship between art-object and art-observer, Gatfield's Portia (2010) extends these themes. As a sharply geometric, glass shape on a concrete plinth, the sculpture immediately generates a tension between positive and negative space. Reflecting and refracting incident light, the glass portion of the sculpture undermines distinctions between inside and outside. In viewing their reflected selves, spectators experience a sense of displacement and destabilisation of selfhood only amplified by the distinctive I-shape of the glass. Where, precisely, does the viewer stand in relation to the work? Does the work function as an assertion of the artist's unique identity - or of the art object? Is the artist 'in the work' or is the work 'in the artist?' Characteristically, Gatfield frames these questions, but leaves them tantalizingly unresolved.

The I-shape resonates throughout New Zealand art history - most famously in Colin McCahon's Necessary Protection paintings and Victory Over Death No.2 (1970). In McCahon, the Tau-cross, 'I' or 'I Am' motifs signify a desire to validate Selfhood through a union with the divine. The drama and tension in McCahon's work is a product of his own struggle with questions of faith. The questions Gatfield poses are more abstract but, in a sense, even more fundamental. Selfhood and Objecthood - as well as the frameworks within such categories are defined - are now placed in question. Like the female lead in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, from which it takes its name, Gatfield's Portia, in the artist's own words, 'addresses the restraints of convention by the exposure and enforcement of those conventions' tenets, ultimately questioning the veracity of "black letter law." '

David Khan