Yvonne Todd: Creamy Psychology
CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON
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Two of Wellington’s public galleries devoted the entirety of their respective spaces to solo exhibitions by New Zealand artists this year, an exceedingly rare occurrence. The most recent of these ventures is the City Gallery’s Creamy Psychology, a formidably detailed and cohesive mid-career retrospective of the photographer Yvonne Todd. Todd has enjoyed much support in the past decade or so, particularly since becoming the first recipient of the country’s prestigious Walters Prize in 2002, judged that year by the venerable curator Harald Szeemann, who said Todd’s was “the work that irritated me the most.” (The other major solo show in Wellington featured Simon Denny, Berlin-based nominee for the prize in 2012 and last year.) Todd’s images take their initial cue from the tropes of commercial portrait photography, but tangle with an eclectic range of cultural phenomena derived from diverse sources along the way.

Todd consistently treads a fine line between the grotesque and the glamorous, seeking to acknowledge the close, almost dialectical, relationship between the two. While her works generally take the form of large-scale, immaculately presented color prints, Todd is fascinated with states of unease, from eating disorders to crippling infirmities, as well as with subcultural groups, from fundamentalists to vegans. Todd has an avid fan’s interest in popular culture, most often anachronistic and American, which also speaks to how many New Zealanders before the ubiquity of broadband internet engaged with a culture industry generated thousands of miles away, and accessed largely through television, cinema, and magazines.

Todd’s women (her subjects are almost exclusively female) are often depicted as girl-children with glazed-over expressions—photographic Stepford beings occupying some nether region between the studio setup and the suburban locale. She is intrigued by the toll taken by the unrealistic expectations of celebrity culture, both on celebrities themselves, and on the mere mortals who fantasize about them. Narratives around Christina Onassis, JonBenet Ramsey, Karen Carpenter, and “Sybil,” infamous for her sixteen distinct personalities, provide inspirational fuel for Todd’s imagery. In Cheer (2001), six women’s heads are viewed from behind, floating on a dark background, their carefully configured ponytails and elaborately plaited braids adorned with ribbons, giving us more than enough information to construct our own path through this oblique typological portrait/still life.

But more often, Todd shoots totemic, boldly frontal images, the denizens of her various fantasy worlds gazing directly at us, whether in The Wall of Man (2009), featuring corporate-style portraits of men between the ages of sixty-five and seventy-five who responded to Todd’s classified ad; or photos such as Frenzy (2006), in which a blonde protagonist with a pronounced overbite reclines in a cinder-block basement, clad in an enormous plaid dress; or Goot Sluice (2006), in which we might wonder what will become of the cat that is being clutched in a not especially tender manner.

In one early series of images entitled Bellevue (2002), beauty consultants from designer cosmetic brands (Lancôme, Shiseido, Dior) are photographed in an approach not unlike the sterile exactitude of German photographers Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth. But quite significantly, Todd derives inspiration from childhood interests, such as fashion, that once seemed entirely exotic (and unattainable) to her. A room in Creamy Psychology displays gowns Todd has since collected, including one worn by Whitney Houston and several designed by Bob Mackie, renowned couturier of sequined and rhinestone-studded apparel for the stars.

A large room in the exhibition gathers together the art and ephemera that have served as highly useful research material for the artist, including photographs by Bernd and Hilla Becher and Diane Arbus, copies of Vogue and Playboy magazines, Sweet Valley High pulp novel covers, a clip from The Valley of the Dolls (1967, directed by Mark Robson), Victorian cartes-de-visite, and Todd’s own working sketchbooks. This material, along with some compelling photos from a 1957 children’s fancy dress ball that Todd printed from the archive of her cousin Gilbert Melrose, a working commercial photographer, amply fills in gaps we might yet have in regard to the artist’s aesthetic allegiances.

Yvonne Todd is utterly enraptured with kitsch, long associated in historical art critical discourse with the completely false and insincere. Yet throughout this exhibition, Todd convincingly makes the case (perhaps her primary one) that however glitzily inauthentic and seemingly superficial our obsessions, they can still elicit genuine emotional and psychological depth.

MARTIN PATRICK is an art critic, writer, and senior lecturer in the School of Art at Massey University in Wellington, New Zealand.