

Cry Me a Reality

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To say that society today is obsessed with the 'reality' phenomenon is an understatement, and yet the idea itself is in many ways redundant and even ridiculous. Who was the enterprising advertiser who first decided to up-sell us something we get for free, just by existing? It has been argued that we are searching for something 'real' in a world that is becoming increasingly digitalised, computerised, and 'virtual'. But equally, the point could merely be escapism, a wish to trade in one's 'reality' for someone else's. Either way, the long-reaching arms of commercialised reality seem to have infiltrated so many parts of society today that it is hardly surprising that contemporary art has also been affected. But can works of art manage to surpass the trashy, voyeuristic reputation of television shows such as 'Big Brother' or 'Australian Idol'? And, with art works increasingly engaging with popular culture (in the footsteps of Warhol's famous notion of fifteen minutes of fame), have artists exchanged meaning for cheap thrills as they exploit both the subject and viewer's emotions?

If contemporary moving image art does indeed reflect society's many flings with popular culture, surely The Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) in Brisbane would contain evidence of this trend. And so I found myself wandering the white washed corridors of GoMA, seeking new additions to the 'reality art' craze. As I did so, three works of art caught my attention: Candice Breitz's *King (a Portrait of Michael Jackson)* (2005); Kate Murphy's, *Cry Me a Future (Dublin)* (2006); and Tony Schwensen's *Rocking in the free world – Neil Young's passport* (2008).

Firstly, I encounter Candice Breitz's work, contained mysteriously within a dark partitioned room in the gallery space. Inside are sixteen identical screens, each containing its own hilariously mediocre die-hard Michael Jackson fan. The premise is simple: they sing along to Jackson's entire 'Thriller' album to a backing track which has been cut out of the artwork, leaving only their sometimes clumsy and amusing interpretations. At first, the whole thing seems sickeningly like 'Australian Idol' 'bloopers'—funny, quite embarrassing, and slightly cruel. I sit in the room for some time watching the performers. I am drawn to a girl in pink near the middle, who is so self-conscious that she can barely look at the camera, let alone bust the moves that some of the others are performing. There are Michael Jackson impersonators and belly dancers and people who look as though they could be living next door to me. Roughly in unison, they move through the intros and then burst into the lyrics of their favourite musician, faces flushed and eyes shining. The effect is more disarming than I want to admit, and I am not the only one absorbed by the show. At any time a small, silent crowd of onlookers stands transfixed, and sometimes they even join in with the singing. If Candice Breitz was filming the spirit of Michael Jackson's music, this would surely be it.

I have barely come out of *King (a Portrait of Michael Jackson)* when I see my next reality art specimen. *Cry Me a Future (Dublin)* is an initially perplexing work. The projected image features Murphy's face sporting a party hat and headphones, and records her progress through stages ranging from blank and dry-eyed, to tearful and chin-wobbling. Surely, I reason, this has to be a bit basic and crudely emotional? Audience members are encouraged to listen to the same audio track as Murphy, which is an Irish psychic's conversation with Murphy's deceased grandmother. After listening to it, I decide that the real emotional reaction of Murphy herself is the one aspect that saves *Cry Me a Future (Dublin)* from its formulaic destiny, and even somewhat redeems the party hat. It is openly exploitative of the audience's emotions, but perhaps that is where the psychic connection comes in.

Of all three reality artworks, *Rocking in the free world – Neil Young's passport* is the most simple and, simultaneously, the most obscure. It features the artist, Tony Schwensen, in all his middle aged and be-shorted glory, rocking slowly in a chair, completely blank faced. It is mind-numbingly boring. In order to understand it better I turn to his other works displayed

on TV monitors, which feature him lying on a bed and dancing around his living room. It is 'Big Brother', except Tony Schwensen is the kind of guy who would never, ever, pass the entrance rounds. And of course, that is the point—this is actual Reality TV.

So does reality art rise above its guttural potential? From my experience of these art works, it does. While on the surface they may seem to imitate the codes of reality television, the messages behind the artworks are often extremely complex. They are entertaining, but they also pose questions about society and popular culture. They even question the relevance and importance of the forms they appropriate. Also, they remind us that emotional voyeurism has been present in artworks throughout history—think of Mantegna's *San Sebastian* (1457-58), or Picasso's *Weeping Woman* (1937). Even though the forms of art have changed as technology continues to evolve, human emotion still hits home.