



TOPIAS I

GEORGIE
MATTINGLEY

APRIL 29 – MAY 21

And above all, beauty

When Georgie unveiled her statement for this show, I was stumped. After having seen her at work for several years, after having assisted her on shoots, I had crafted a certain cosmology to explain her work, to justify its importance to myself and the world at large. Here was her forceful turning of our heads, eyes-peeled Clockwork Orange style, to stare back at the acts, places and people essential to our lifestyle that we normally prefer to ignore. There was the orchestrated collision between opposed worlds that I feel mistrust each other: art and work, the exposure and re-bridging of their insularities. On the dark side: manipulation; class tourism; appeal to the macabre and shock-value. On the bright one: dialogue; authenticity; layering and complexity. It was going to be easy to write a piece detailing this cosmology and explaining why her work is so important and necessary. Georgie is my hard-headed hero: running counter-current among her peers, guided by a definite sense of what is right, what is meaningful. Still, she threw a major spanner in the works by mentioning the elephant in the room in her statement. Here was re-revealed the supermassive black hole around which the Georgie galaxy had always revolved: Beauty! And not just beauty casually... This was a case of "and above all, beauty"! I was thus forced to reconsider my utilitarian approach to her work, to shift gear into the transcendental and return to the big forbidden question: "why, what, how beauty?"

On December the 10th, I was assisting Georgie on her latest shoot at the Altona refinery. I was numb and exhausted. A breakup, followed by a sleepless night, followed by a dazed drive through the industrial atopia of the Western suburbs, followed by the mechanical setting up of a makeshift studio in an office space, followed by the putting on of an undersized high-vis jumpsuit, a hard hat, a particle monitor and laceless boots, had all passed before I emerged, into the roaring domain of sulfur. Our conscientious guide was taking us through the sprawling complex while Georgie looked for workers to photograph. As the hours passed, and we wandered along perpendicular roadways, surrounded by uncountable rust coloured tubes, OH&S signage, jets of pressurised steam being released into the cloudless sky, their ethereal shadows projected onto the concrete ground as they were spread and dissolved by the southerly breeze; I was filled by a growing sense of serenity. Was it the first sign of neural damage from an undetected gas leak? My particle monitor spelt 0, yet the sweet fetidness permeating the space was only enhancing this odd feeling of comfort. It felt like a return to a home I had never known to have left. Perhaps had I worked on an oil refinery in a previous life? Was this the outcome of having the ultimate touristic experience: being sent as an observer to an unknown place with close to no prior of knowledge of it? Was this pure state of perceptivity of an unmediated world, enhanced by sleep deprivation, a throwback to the constant wonder of early childhood? As the day progressed, I tried to analyse the undeniable beauty I was experiencing. Was it inherent to the refinery? Was it the triumphant industrial beauty of the futurists, brought on by the overwhelming complexity of the structure and the potential for annihilation that permeates it? I was on track to a first definition of beauty, or at least on track to assembling a corner of the beauty puzzle: beauty as a state of mind, as an internal response to the outside world. In this case, that of the sublime¹, a last loving embrace from our brains, rewarding us for having made it that far—administered as a perfusion of endorphins—as we freeze, about to be vanquished by a great predator, by a sulfur giant, by life itself.

It was obvious, though, that this was not the answer and the type of beauty Georgie was interested in on that day. She had focused her attention on a small ornamental garden in a corner of the refinery compound: neatly arranged cypresses mimicking the refinery's stacks, mulch concrete flower pots and a—most likely never used—picnic table. The picture she was methodically trying to capture is a work titled *Landscape I*. This small space within the refinery operated like a perfect symptom of what Georgie sought. What she had found was a token of beauty—which like a balanced meal or an eight hour night of sleep, can be rationalised, rationed, administered. As such, the refinery's ornamental garden partakes to a kind of beauty that is easily definable in terms of objective biological needs. This conception of beauty is not a novel idea; it only took a quick look through the Wikipedia page for beauty to find explanations of the phenomenon following purely evolutionary,

¹ I am thinking here of the sublime as described by Arthur Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation* as being a feeling brought on by overpowering or vast malignant object of great magnitude, one that could destroy the observer.

Darwin frameworks. In a TedTalk video Conservative art historian Denis Dutton proposes a supposedly evidence based, replicable Darwinian explanation for the phenomenon of beauty as being tied situations that satisfied the needs of our Pleistocene forebears. He goes on to describe scenic beauty:

“People in very different cultures all over the world tend to like a particular kind of landscape, a landscape that just happens to be similar to the Pleistocene savannas where we evolved. This landscape shows up today on calendars, on postcards, in the design of golf courses and public parks and in gold-framed pictures that hang in living rooms from New York to New Zealand. It’s a kind of Hudson River school landscape featuring open spaces of low grasses interspersed with copses of trees. The trees, by the way, are often preferred if they fork near the ground, that is to say, if they’re trees you could scramble up if you were in a tight fix. The landscape shows the presence of water directly in view, or evidence of water in a bluish distance, indications of animal or bird life as well as diverse greenery and finally – get this – a path or a road, perhaps a riverbank or a shoreline, that extends into the distance, almost inviting you to follow it. This landscape type is regarded as beautiful, even by people in countries that don’t have it. The ideal savanna landscape is one of the clearest examples where human beings everywhere find beauty in similar visual experience.”¹

This supposed scenic beauty of ur-humanity is surprisingly well matched by Komar and Melamid’s *Most Wanted Paintings* series. The series features works produced after crunching the data from surveys conducted in several countries, asking people what they thought made a painting beautiful. The end results are almost identical across cultures and undeniably kitsch in a Bob Ross sort of way. Assuming there is such a thing as a need for beauty, like Georgie and the tokenistic presence of the ornamental garden suggest, this standardisable kitsch form of beauty becomes the most reliable way of meeting this need. Just like standardised food can be calibrated to fulfil our basic requirements regardless of individual preferences; spaces and ornaments can be arranged to fire the most basal reward circuits of our brains, whoever we may be.

Unsurprisingly, Georgie’s obsession with kitsch has been as long running as her fascination and commitment to the world of intensive labour. It is not her first work meshing standardised, uniformed humanity, in the shape of the worker or the patient, with the blank slate of beauty that is kitsch. However, below this prosaic juxtaposition, we can sense an increasing urgency to sublimate these topias and their inhabitants, a forceful drive to infuse the kitsch and the uniform with the affect of metaphysical potency. Within five minutes of having first met Georgie, she was describing to me her experience working at the abattoir, cleaning the anal cavity of a carcass to the sound of pigs and getting slaughtered complemented by gold.fm blaring through the factory, as a moment of intense spiritual bliss. Perhaps that too was the result of an endorphin rush, an ersatz Near Death Experience, Schopenhauer’s sublime triggered by close confrontation to mass-scale horror, the mass-scale horror that sustains our civilisation. It is when we investigate these places and moments, located at the roots through which our society keeps itself alive, that the materialist, efficiency driven template along which our world is structured (the same materialism that informs Dutton’s philosophy of beauty) becomes most obvious and unbearable. Through her choices of gestures, compositions and colours, feet levitating, hands gesturing, referencing the paranormal as well as Renaissance painting, we can sense a desperate yearning for transcendence, for meaning beyond material concerns.

It will be misguided and ultimately unsatisfying to look for a clearer definition of what beauty is in this show; nor should we expect this work to provide a politically correct exposé of the 21st century worker’s condition. By exposing uniformed workers and the uniformity of kitsch as blank socio-cultural canvases, Georgie’s work is much more likely to induce a necessary feeling of discomfort. I believe we will be best served by looking at these picture as unique views of the places and moments, *topias*, where the materialistic ideological infrastructure at work beneath the smooth fabric of our lives outcrop. Georgie’s compassionate attempts at beautification, in the end, doing much more to highlight materialism’s inadequacy than to glorify it.

By Guillaume Savvy

1 Dutton, D. (2010, February). Dennis Dutton: A Darwinian theory of beauty [transcript]. Retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/denis_dutton_a_darwinian_theory_of_beauty/transcript?language=en



Above: Georgie Mattingley 'Landscape I' 2016, oil on silver gelatin hand print 90 x 60 cm

Cover: Georgie Mattingley 'Portrait V' 2016, oil on silver gelatin hand print 36 x 26 cm

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