



Cover: Tatjana Plitt, *The Bedroom Philosopher*, 2007, 51x71cm, c-type photograph. **Left:** Sapna Chandu, *Emergency procedures*, 2007, 80x80cm, c-type photograph. **Left below:** Emma Thomson, *The Entertainers*, 2006, 92x74cm, c-type photograph.



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8th-25th May
 Opening 8th May, 6.30-8.30pm
 Artists talk 11th May, 1.00pm

To be opened by Robert Cook, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art, Art Gallery of Western Australia

Catalogue essay by Dr Maurita Harney, Senior Fellow in Philosophy, The University of Melbourne
 Gallery hours Thursday to Sunday 12.00-5.00pm



The Artists give special thanks to Dr Maurita Harney, Robert Cook, Mark Thomson and all the staff at PCP.



Stranger than Fiction

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Sapna Chandu, Tatjana Plitt and Emma Thomson

The images depicted here draw us into a web of ambiguities and paradoxes which prompt us to re-think what we mean by the real and the unreal, the mundane and the extraordinary, the authentic and the deceptive. Ambiguities permeate relationships: what appears to be suburban, mundane, and ordinary can disguise a darker play of suppressed aggression, narcissism, or indifference. A person's identity can find its most authentic expression in a relationship – or it can be totally annihilated by merging with 'the other'. Relationships embody narratives, each one unique, and each with its unforgettable moments including both the humdrum and the bizarre; the fantasy and the reality, the spontaneous and the staged. The relationship between artist and subjects is also important in these works. The camera which mediates that relationship can be many things. It can be the vehicle of documentation, depicting life 'as it is'; it can be an instrument of power, objectifying and manipulating its subjects, sapping them of their individuality; it can be an instrument of voyeurism, implicating viewers in a power-game of 'the gaze'. In the hands of these artists the camera is put to the service of the creative process. It becomes a medium through which experiences, narratives, dreams and fantasies of others are shared or enhanced. The situations depicted – even the seemingly spontaneous – are to a greater or lesser degree contrived. The subjects themselves are collaborators in the contriving. Paradoxically, it is through this very contriving that a truth about the subjects is revealed. Artist and subjects collaborate in constructing the image which reveals an authenticity in these narratives and relationships – the shared



intimacies, the private fantasies. The truth they reveal is an existential truth, an insight into the personal realities of the people depicted and the experiences that are meaningful to them. Like works of fiction these images use artifice and construction to reveal a truth as authenticity.

Performance and theatricality are normally understood as make-believe, unreal, play. They are part of our fantasy life. And the glossy representations of performers and celebrities in publicity shots is part of this deception – a pretence at glamour and sophistication. Tatjana Plitt's series of images, *Blaze*, parodies theatrical photographs of staged settings and exaggerated gestures. Rather than conceal the real person, as publicity photographs aim to do, her images reveal the authenticity of these relationships through the very theatricality of the performances that they depict. In doing this, her images suggest that fantasy in some important sense is reality. It is an essential



component of the reality of the particular relationship. These couples are not unwitting victims of the Mills and Boon romantic fiction machine. They have not been deluded into mistaking the romantic for the real. Rather, they have appropriated elements of this genre to construct their own rich and authentic fantasy lives. Their fantasies are an important part of their reality, not an escape from it. This is no pathological confusion of fantasy life with reality. Fantasy becomes reality, but in the sense which marks these relationships as vibrant, creative and authentic. Our expectation that suburban 'coupledom' marks the death of authenticity is immediately disrupted in Emma Thomson's *The Homemakers*. Relationships which appear to be normal or mundane can mask a darker dynamic which might even be seen as a microcosm of society at large. Relationships can fracture atomistically resulting in two separate narcissistic, self-absorbed individuals like those suggested in *The Entertainers*; at the other extreme they can dissolve individual identity into a synchronous unity like that hinted at in *The Connoisseurs*; suburban respectability can harbour deep-seated aggression like that which seems to

lurk in *Just Another Sunday*. Emma Thomson's images are not judgmental or cynical. They might just as easily be parodying the darker side of relationships. Indeed, playing with such dark themes might itself be part of a fantasy-life. In all of these images, mundane ordinary objects and settings play an important role. They are part of 'real life'. But when they become props in the fantasy lives of their owners they take on a new significance. They cease to be the 'dead matter' of a mere background or setting, and take on a new life and vibrancy. These mundane settings acquire a new significance because they mean something to the couples in terms of their fantasies.

Left: Sapna Chandu, *Defending love* (collaboration with Talica and Nathan Rosenbaum), 2007, 80x80cm, c-type photograph. **Above:** Emma Thomson, *Just another Sunday*, 2006, 92x74cm, c-type photograph. **Right:** Tatjana Plitt, *Afternoon Delight*, 2007, 71x51cm, c-type photograph.

There is indeed something uncanny about the relationships depicted in Sapna Chandu's *Some Things Uncanny*. Paradoxically, they are relationships in which one person is often invisible - out of shot, although the identity of this absent 'other' is ambiguously present in the visual clues. Relationships like the chance encounter or the spontaneous moment might seem to be uncontrived. However, as photographic images, they are staged. These people are performing, but they are performing themselves in the reality of their memories. Often these images capture a 'frozen moment' of time – that moment which is crystallised in personal memory when other details have been forgotten. *Mother's Day* suggests an archaeological site where "potted" memories are being excavated. Or buried? These frozen moments are enigmatic because they are the visible part of a larger narrative which is concealed. We are invited to speculate not just on the absent past but also on the imagined future, as in the cascading water about to fall in *Emergency Procedures* (thrown by an absent 'other'?). We, the viewers, become part of these narratives because we must engage imaginatively with these images in their play of concealing and revealing, their juxtaposition of the absent and the present, their discovery of the uncanny in the mundane.



In the spirit of play and fantasy, there is a subtext of humour in many of the images presented here. But it is a humour shared with the people depicted, rather than one that objectifies those subjects. Photography is an ambiguous medium. It can be a vehicle of documentation, claiming to construct an accurate record, or to capture situations as they 'really' exist or happen. It is also an instrument of fantasy, of 'faking it', of deception. This ambiguity is celebrated in all of these images – the depiction of 'life as it is' which is at the same time, 'life as it is not'. It is said that Picasso described art as "true lies". It lies by depicting something which is contrived, not real. At the same time it reveals a truth deeper than that of any literal representation. In these images, these paradoxes are played out in a way which invites us to reflect upon the photographic medium and its potentialities. They have a self-reflective quality. They refer us back to thinking about photography, particularly photography as authentic art, and the unique way in which the camera, in the hands of the artist, can reveal a truth that is indeed 'stranger than fiction.'

Dr Maurita Harney
2007