

Exhibition Essay

This is an exhibition of mainly vintage, hand-coloured black and white prints from the 80s and 90s, by Brisbane artist Susan Leway.

A few Australian photographers were playing with hand colouring techniques at that time – the beginnings of a period that has since been described as ‘post photographic’. It was not the traditional hand colouring of the wedding studios, made to look ‘real’, but a more interpretative approach, produced to look ‘hand coloured’. Most of the new hand colourists were female – the likes of Micky Allen - who drew on feminist strategies, emphasising the personal and autobiographical with a social documentary basis.

However it may eventually be interpreted, Leway’s intentions were not so feminist, nor so obviously socially aware. She just loved big machines! In the catalogue of her 1994 exhibition as artist in residence at Indy on the Gold Coast, Doug Spowart wrote. “Hers has always been rather mechanical, with a bent towards the apparatus of flight. Cigar shaped fuselage, two bladed prop, clash of perspex and rivets along with the occasional brave young aviator. Always Leway's photographs have been embellished with a layer of hand applied coloured dyes. Now it seems there has been a change, but strangely, although the machines are ground based, there still pervades a whiff of octane and flight.”

Leway herself put it even more passionately in 1993, “Tension, Excitement, Heat and Anticipation are four words that spell Indy to me”

In these digital days, ‘Photoshop’ is often used, in everyday language, to imply some sort of dishonesty. When Leway made these images, it was simpler. Sure, there were photographic critics concerned with whether photography’s purity was compromised, but no one thought it was dishonest. She put paint on photos. Strangely, in a world now, where we are bombarded by both subtly, and brutally, altered images, the pictures in this exhibition still have an unusual strength – maybe because it’s real paint on the paper.

Spowart wrote in 1994, “This new offering of Leway hand-tinted work continues to challenge our perception of colour and representation. For these photographs are neither natural colour nor are they monochrome black and white. They are perhaps Lewaycolour as it is through her selection and application that the chromatic aspects of these images are determined. Through this deliberate colourisation of a black and white base image, unimaginable colours, except those which are in the artist's mind, can be selected, applied and juxtaposed.”

Leway’s current exhibition at Woolloongabba Art Gallery has been produced with the artist facing many difficulties. It is pleasing to see a few recent digital images, but the majority of the work is older images. They are as fresh, or even fresher, today. To repeat what Doug Spowart said in the Indy catalogue, thank you, Susan.

The exhibition runs for one week at Woolloongabba Art Gallery from 27 – 31 August, 2013.

~ Glen O’Malley 2013

“The pits were incredible - so much going on, the level of technology astounding. Everyone (the teams) were linked by radio, computers abounded, even the camera crews were linked together by their equipment. Watching the crews perform their duties, I was amazed at the teamwork involved and the speed at which they executed them. Basically you have about six seconds to capture the action because by eight seconds the crews were back behind the barrier and the cars were gone. I definitely had the feeling that the whole scene was something out of Ancient Rome's "Circus Maximus".

~ Susan Leway 1993