



Sherna Teperson, Drew Bickford, Marius Jastkowiak,
Luis Martinez, Nana Ohnesorge, Rene Christen

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ORGANISED BY Drew Bickford

CATALOGUE ESSAY Daniel Mudie Cunningham

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FRENZY

To be whipped into a state of frenzy by art seems absurd these days – we're all too cool, ironic and detached. The kind of affect we understand in relation to contemporary art is the lack of affect - to be affectless, disaffected, dead bored. Hal Foster once wrote: "many artists seem driven to inhabit a place of total affect and to be drained of affect altogether... This oscillation suggests the dynamic of psychic shock of trauma. Pure affect, no affect: It hurts, I can't feel anything" (The Return of the Real: The Avant Garde at the End of the Century, 1996: p.166)

It is this contradiction that underscores many responses to artworks that challenge us – being so 'moved' we are numbed. Art about horror, terror, shock, war, crime, disease, rape, humiliation, etc, carry the burden of response dependent on how 'desensitised' we have let ourselves become. In the late 19th century, with the mechanised wheels of modernity in full swing, people craved shock – indeed the world had become marked by the embedded dangers of industrialisation. Before modernity, the prime site of disaster was nature, whereas the modern age initiated other kinds of disasters: cars swerve off roads, planes fall from the sky, trains derail, buildings fall, cities are bombed. With modern times came modern people ideologically programmed with an appetite for shocking entertainment (in the guise of freak shows, museums of death, houses of horror, shocking cinema and the like).

Frenzy, in our contemporary, post postmodern age, is always mediated by the dangerous pleasures of a world driven mad by occularcentrism – where shock, terror and trauma only mean something if they are rendered spectacularly visible. As painful as these experiences are, the ability to be jolted by them reminds us we are alive. When we don't feel the jolt, we may as well be dead and in fact, most of us are dead already. To be frenzied is to be wildly agitated, crazed and disturbed. Frenzy is the stuff of horror movies and crime scenes. It's no wonder Hitchcock understood its onomatopoeic quality, when he named his necktie strangler classic Frenzy in 1972.

There is no denying the power of the image. An image can punch us in the guts, make us hurl. I remember the visceral shock of throwing up my Maltesers when a prison inmate threw semen in Clarice Starling's hair in Silence of the Lambs, when I first saw the film in 1991. Indeed, there's never a more frenzied state than being moved to protest or censor an image that disturbs. Media frenzies are part and parcel of our age and art is not immune. Think the stupidity of the recent Bill Henson furor.

The frenzy of art, though, is best expressed through the phenomenon of the Stendhal Syndrome, a psychosomatic illness that erupts when a viewer experiences dizziness, rapid heartbeat, hallucination and disorientation when exposed to particularly beautiful artworks.

States of frenzy, its after-effects and aesthetics are the raw material for this exhibition. Drew Bickford's meticulously detailed drawings depict the frenzied mental states of three real life criminals: Dennis Rader, a serial strangler whose calling card were the letters BTK (Bind Torture Kill), Andrew Cunanan, the man who killed Gianni Versace after a cross country killing spree, and Joseph Kallinger, who enlisted his 14 year old son to join him in a rape and torture road trip. In response to the Stendhal Syndrome, Nana Ohnesorge conveys the intensity of emotion felt when overwhelmed by art. Allusions to religious iconography showing states of agony and ecstasy are amplified, expressing what it might feel like to have an exploding head.

Sherna Teperson's Snow White explores the phobias that lead to frenzy. Referencing an incident where her bread sculptures were hideouts for cockroaches, purity meets pestilence in a cryptic installation that reworks the classic fairytale. A fear of contamination also informs Rene Christen's live video and web installation. On screen, a mouse is lured to a trap placed on a small altar, sacrificed in the name of human hygiene. Christen's work elicits contrary feelings of pity and disgust for a doomed creature, as viewers navigate the moral terrain of a scenario dependent on the tensions of anticipation and shock.

The frenzied spectacle of the nocturnal cityscape is depicted by Marius Jastkowiak through the synecdoche of neon signs. Through blurred focus, Jastkowiak's paintings suggest the over-stimulation of seedy city life, where various 'retail' seductions scream at us in bright neon. In contrast, the repetitive and monotonous drone of factory labour underpins Luis Martinez's routed wood panel monochromes. The monotonous rhythms of the conveyor belt generate anxiety and fugue states, dulling the nervous system to the point where the only way to resist the rut is the whirling vortex of frenzy.

Daniel Mudie Cunningham

Sherna Teperson
The Duel, 2008
Tracing paper, fluorescent marker,
graphite, cockroaches, lightbox
Dimensions variable



Drew Bickford
Cunanan, 2008
Ink on paper
78 x 56 cm
Photo: Silversalt



Marius Jastkowiak
Study for Porkys, 2008
Oil on canvas
25 x 30 cm



Luis Martinez
Untitled (detail), 2008
Acrylic and oil on routed wood panel
35 x 40 cm



Nana Ohnesorge
Frenzy (pink fit), 2008
Watercolour, acrylic ink and paint and spray
paint, gouache & pigment pen on paper,
work in progress
76.5 x 57 cm



Rene Christen
A Sacrifice for Hygia, 2008
Live video installation and web piece



