



Strange Archipelago

Jacqui Stockdale

12 May - 12 June 2010



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The nude in *Antipodes* balances a pile of objects on her slender frame: fragments of Mexican masks, Indian deities, and papier-mâché skulls for the Day of the Dead. Instead of studying each of these unusual, treasured items individually, Stockdale fuses them together to make one teeming form. Each of the drawings and paintings in this series contains a swarming island of faces: masks which the artist has packed into mounds, like snow or dirt. Occasionally the detritus resolves itself into a parade behind a single, crowning face, as if to create one mega-mask out of many diverse ones. However, more often it takes on the appearance of a live trash heap, with limbs and parts splayed out of the sides.

For Jacqui Stockdale, a long-time collector and maker of masks, *Strange Archipelago* was intended as a farewell to her collection of unique facial images. She planned to draw them as a pile of disused dolls or carcasses. Instead, the mass grew livelier: a bunch of cast-offs became a vividly patterned and coloured heap, filled with overtopping bits. Stockdale gathered her props from high and low sources, combining painstakingly worked masks with mass-produced costumes from Chinatown. Odd relationships began to form between these disparate objects. In *Wild vs Man*, a skeleton is posed to look elegantly idle, its bones angling down the side of a rocking-horse; another skeleton nuzzles into the fur of a toy animal.

By carefully arranging the collection, Stockdale found a way of weaving together expressions of surprise, anger and Buddhist serenity – although each face is stripped of emotional urgency. In one painting, a tiger leaps across the top of the heap, with fangs bared – but its legs are made to cradle the face of another doll, somewhat protectively. Each form is twisted to incorporate a new and unlikely meaning. Stockdale's aim was to create a “dog-eat-dog” universe, in which every icon would be deprived of its original identity and function. Even an enormous, leering mask loses its macabre effect when inverted to make a habitat for toy mammals. Nothing stands alone: a grave object is tempered and mocked by some little creature, or whatever else can be jammed into the frame.

Stockdale was tempted to throw a Nike runner or mobile phone into the mix, but wanted to avoid any allusion to ecological commentary. Unlike Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger, who make a fairytale clutter out of disposable objects, every fragment of Stockdale's heap is a strange and irreplaceable item. Images of the goddess Kali and Day of the Dead masks have been individually sourced from travels, then tweaked or adapted in some way. Stockdale also incorporated the off-cuts of fellow artists – stuffed animals created by Kate Rohde, a fluffy dog from Genevieve McLean – to ensure that each prop would be a highly worked but unusable piece. As such, this show might be regarded as a dumping ground for every kind of fanciful identity: a stage for the discarded projections of other artists.

As in Stockdale's last show, *Some Kind of Coyote*, masks pop up in unexpected places, wearing provocative and often malign expressions. With the addition of nudity, the use of masks becomes a sexual enigma. Rather than expose her own reactions, the nude holds up a mask as an indication of what she feels. It's a shortcut to communication: instead of going to the trouble of crafting a sincere expression, here's a ready-made one.

Alternatively, it could be seen as a mischievous power play: offering the nude body for delectation, while remaining spiritually aloof and impassive. There is also a third possibility: that the figure in these shots is not a human at all, but a hybrid animal with oddly expressive gestures – the kind of monster/coyote figure seen in Stockdale's previous shows.

Depicting a masked figure is a suggestive concept on multiple levels. In terms of narrative, what exactly is being represented here? Is it a person wearing a mask, in a theatrical context? Is it a new type of creature, which fuses a human body with a waxed face? Or are these pictures about the mystery of form: the prospect of seeing two dimensions hover above three? That's the central ambiguity of these demanding works.

Written by Lesley Chow 2010

Helen Gory Galerie
25 St Edmonds Rd
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Tel +61 3 9525 2808

gallery@helengory.com
www.helengory.com
Wed – Sat 11am – 5pm

Front Image:

The animal rider

2010, oil on canvas, 195 x 165cm





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List of Works:

- 1/ **Antipodes, 2010**
Oil on linen, 240 x 180cm
- 2/ **Chaperon, 2010**
Oil on linen, 180 x 240cm
- 3/ **No man an island #2, 2010**
Charcoal on paper, 100 x 140cm
- 4/ **No man an island #3, 2010**
Charcoal on paper, 100 x 140cm
- 5/ **Studio, 2010**

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