

:art



# behind beauty's masks

works by Deborah Klein

Interview and Text by Inga Walton

Image: *Watching You, Watching Me* (1996), linocut (ed/15), 46 x 31 cm  
(Collection, Art Gallery of Ballarat, Victoria & Private Collections)

Who calls her two-faced? Faces she has three;  
 The first inscrutable, for the outer world;  
 The second shrouded in self-contemplation;  
 The third, her face of love,  
 Once for an endless moment turned on me.

'The Three-Faced' by Robert von Ranke Graves (1895-1985)

For nearly thirty years, the work of the renowned Melbourne artist Deborah Klein has focussed almost exclusively on exploring aspects of feminine personae, representation and identity. Her work is informed by an understanding of socio-cultural markers and historical references, wrought against the wider framework of contemporary gender politics, feminist dialogue and popular culture. The more psychological implications that resonate throughout Klein's artistic *mise en scène* heighten the impact conveyed by her imagery. Klein's practice is characterised by extensive research, immersion in period nuances and the exacting attention to detail she brings to her works, which encompass painting, printmaking, applied sculpture, drawing and book illustration.

It is therefore surprising to learn that Klein's expansive and meticulous study of this artistically fertile area seems to have been an almost organic development, and not based on any specific decision or intent. Nor are there any particular memories from her childhood or adolescence that inspired this interest, except perhaps the lingering influence of her immediate

family. 'I had no siblings, and tended to withdraw into my imagination a lot,' Klein recalls. 'My mother introduced me to films and theatre, she encouraged a love of books and the arts in general, and this fuelled my imagination. My aunt Eileen, who lived next door, was something of a *fashionista* in her younger days. I still have a couple of her dresses, some hats and pieces of costume jewellery. I've also got a handful of photos of her from the 1930s and 40s dressed to the nines and looking fabulous. Possibly something of this stayed dormant within me and years later infiltrated my work. In fact, I've just remembered that one of her little black dresses was the basis for one of my oil pastel *Torso* studies [2003]'.<sup>1</sup>

Klein contends that virtually all the key developments in her practice were initially directed by the work itself. 'Ideas breed ideas, which are then supplemented by a process of examining available pictorial and written sources. Working in series or suites enables me to explore a theme as thoroughly as possible, and to more fully develop the narratives that are inherent in the work.' Klein's mastery of a wide range of media allows for

a seamless transition in the way she handles particular disciplines, relative to what best suits the theme she is addressing. 'In the 1980s I went to art school after living for several years in London. The time I spent overseas was probably more seminal than the time I subsequently spent in formal study. I began as a painting major, but fairly soon switched to printmaking, eventually specialising in relief prints. I was drawn to the directness of linocuts; the cutting tools are like drawing implements, at least in my approach to them. In the last fifteen years or so I've also begun painting again. The importance of drawing was stressed at art school and it is central to my practice. A great many of my drawings are oil pastels. They suit me because they are a kind of bridge between painting and drawing, in that they are both painterly and linear in nature. My choice of medium is entirely dictated by my theme.'

The scrupulous and faithful attention to every aspect of composition has become one of Klein's hallmarks. A collection of diminutive works viewed at London's Kenwood House in 1998 had a monumental impact on Klein's subsequent work.<sup>1</sup> 'The tiny, intricately woven braids incorporated into the mourning jewellery became points of

departure for the hairstyles adorning the protagonists in my next body of work. And the scaled-down size of my images took their cue from the minute portrait miniatures that I observed there. My exploration of the feminine archetype was extended to include notions of ornament and presentation. This was first and most fully realised in the solo exhibition *Private Collection* [2000].<sup>1</sup> Klein is intently aware of the entrancement she can convey within her ravishing panels. 'I have an inherent love of pattern and decoration. The allure of beautifully made clothing is undeniable, and elaborate costume has been a significant part of many of my works. Fashion can be fun and creative, but it depends entirely on the context in which it is presented. I was aware that I was treading a fine line with some of my imagery, starting with those in *Private Collection*. Many people found the paintings enticing and seductive, not realising that the women depicted were trapped as surely as insects pinned and encased under glass.'

The classification of etymological specimens by museums and collectors, and how this hierarchical approach might express or reflect human strategies for maintaining social order and behaviour, proved to be a potent metaphor for the artist. Klein's initial

<sup>1</sup> A collection of (mainly British) portrait miniatures was bequeathed to Kenwood House from the estate of Marie Elizabeth Jane Irving Draper (1940-87). The original gift grew over time from 20 to over 100 items with the support of Draper's mother and executrix Elizabeth Pearce. The memorial, or mourning, jewellery on display forms part of the collection given to Kenwood in 1975 by scholar, antiquarian and collector Anne Hull Grundy (1927-84).

series *Moth Masks* (2007-09) extended into *Angels and Arthropods* (2010-11), which have all now come under the extended 'classification' of the 'Myth-entomology' works that continue to be her focus. They are all partially inspired by A.S. Byatt's novella *Morpho Eugenia* (1993), and present a series of figures wearing masks composed of butterflies and moths from the Indo-Australian region. These women stare at us passively like delicate objects to be admired and coveted, but not engaged with. Preserved in their exotic finery, Klein suggests that the wings of aspiration and independence have for centuries been 'clipped' by an arsenal of legal, political and religious structures designed to contain the female species.

Lately, the anthropomorphic linkage has become more explicit. 'The "Winged Women" are all hybrid creatures, "freaks of nature", half woman-half insect,' she observes. 'My visual approach to the subject parallels natural history illustration. The notion of the diametrically opposed is common in much of my work. We are drawn to the exquisite jewel-like quality of many insects, especially when dead and safely pinned and ordered in a museum display case. This is counterbalanced by the irrational fear we may experience when encountering the same insects in nature.' What is consistent about Klein's world of

women is their untouchable, enigmatic, and elusive quality. Like a modern-day Scheherazade, Klein's innate gift for storytelling leads her to envisage scenarios where the viewer is held at a distance, but nonetheless enthralled.

Her work eschews the obvious or gratuitous; figures are imbued with a remote and beguiling quality that only serves to pique our curiosity. A certain ambiguity and detachment pervades Klein's work which seems to harken back to an earlier time when subtlety and discretion were valued. She habitually employs strategies of concealment and visual filters; faces are usually obscured by lace, superimposed by tattoos, or averted altogether; anonymous backs and mid-sections tantalise us; colour is either saturated or drained depending on how much of the lady is presented, but seldom do Klein's protagonists meet our gaze head on. Klein feels that the quote from Gertrude Stein, 'I like a view, but I like to sit with my back turned to it', perfectly aligns with the spirit of many of these works.<sup>2</sup>

Although our engagement with Klein's characters is often deliberately restricted or distanced, the works are replete with come-hither detail, striking a difficult balance between denial and gratification of the audience. There is a distinctly erotic frisson present in her compositions, but it remains both somewhat cerebral and restrained in

<sup>2</sup> Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Penguin Classics, London, (1933) 2001, p.7.



*Aictis Erythrozona* (2007), oil pastel on paper, 112 x 76 cm



*Behind the Mask* (2010), acrylic on wooden palette, 20 x 30 cm (Private Collection)



*Red Comb, II* (2004), oil pastel on paper, 75.5 x 56.5 cm  
(Private Collection)



*Black and Blue, II* (2007), oil and acrylic on canvas, 101.5 x 76 cm



*Blue Bird, II* (2007), acrylic on linen, 122 x 91.5 cm



*Large Red Comb* (2004), oil pastel on paper, 122 x 76.5 cm  
(Private Collection)



*Campylotes Desgonsini* (2007), oil pastel on paper, 112 x 76 cm



*Femme Fatale* (1996), linocut and chine collé (ed/15), 61 x 46.5 cm (Collection, Castlemaine Art Gallery and Historical Museum, Victoria & Private Collections)



*Queen of Hearts* (1996), hand coloured linocut (ed/15), 46 x 29 cm (Private Collections)



*Mirror, Mirror* (1996), linocut (ed/15), 31 x 46 cm (Private Collections)

its expression, as if best left to the imagination. 'As for the meaning of the work, clearly it has deep significance for me and something of this may be communicated to others through the imagery. But it needs to have a life and language of its own beyond that. Explaining it all would destroy the very mystery that many people seem drawn to. Something needs to be left for the viewer, who may well respond to it in the same way, or else get something else entirely different from it. I try not to be didactic. Once the work is out of the studio, I have little control over how people will read it.'

There will often be some furtive element that disturbs the ostensibly perfect surface of Klein's representations of femininity, an implied constraint or emotional turmoil which goes unresolved. 'The idea of revealing and concealing developed intuitively. Most people hide behind a veil of some kind. Even our closest friends may not know the sum and total of what makes us who we are. Although we disclose different facets of our personalities to different people, we seldom, if ever, reveal all of ourselves to one person.' Klein's works express the tension between the desire for candour and intimacy and the implied risk of exposure and rejection that is a factor inherent in most of our relationships. Klein's characters are governed by this reluctance to engage, other than the captivating glimpses of them she otherwise affords us.

Often Klein has employed extravagant accessories or coiffeurs as the communicative element for these otherwise fleeting, unknowable figures. The *Tease* (2004) and *Forget Me Knots* (2007) exhibitions were based on aesthetic aspects derived from Klein's own collection of antique combs and hairpins. She then supplemented those templates with examples from other cultural traditions which prize these often valuable ornaments as being synonymous with the feminine mystique and expressive of the sexually charged response to female hair. Ostentatious lacquered adornments stalk through twisting loops and braids of immaculately arranged tresses, their somewhat menacing teeth suggesting a certain defensiveness on the part of the wearer. Klein pushed this bristling scenario to the point of abstraction. 'As the pictures increased in scale, the visual language also changed. The combs were no longer merely decorative. They could potentially serve as weapons, although this wasn't necessarily my intention.'

For all their pulchritude and apparent invulnerability, there is an underlying aspect of unease surrounding the women in Klein's works. This reflects the contentious and often tenuous position females occupy both in the historical context with which Klein engages, and in the contemporary one, as they grapple with restrictive social mores and expectations. In many ways Klein's

imagery articulates the paradigm of display and discomfort that is so much a part of the way in which girls are socialised to solicit and respond to attention.

'Unrealistic aesthetic judgements and values are still imposed on women in regard to their appearance. This can adversely affect their sense of self worth, particularly in their formative years. Some of the values may have changed but the pressures are still there. If there were a point where some of my work intersects with fashion magazines, this would be it.'

One of Klein's abiding preoccupations is to explore the manner in which women are constantly reduced to their surface value, subjected to scrutiny and appraisal. Women continue to be judged on their decorative appeal as objects and as vessels, not only by themselves, but by their peers, and the omnipresent male gaze. 'I think it's fair to say that all my characters are outsiders of some kind, whether they wear tattoos that isolate them from the upper echelons of society, or are adorned with elaborate hairstyles that might denote their position within the higher social orders, but reduce them to little more than collector's items,' Klein asserts. 'The gutsy tattooed women display the stories of their lives on their skins. The tattoos distinguish them as

members of a tribe, while at the same time act as a kind of veil. The "braided" women are slaves to their crowning glories and other accoutrements. In order to best display their elaborate hairstyles they are forced to turn away from the viewer, thus condemning them to eternal anonymity.'

The apparent timelessness of Klein's artistic output sometimes belies her more populist influences, particularly her love of classic Hollywood cinema. She has an ability to recontextualise a universal narrative to suit her own artistic impetus. It was no surprise that Klein's survey exhibition *Out of the Past: 1995-2007*, which toured Victorian regional galleries in 2008, borrowed its title from Jacques Tourneur's 1947 film. The amoral, sexually alluring, and unrepentant anti-heroines as portrayed by actresses like Barbara Stanwyck, Jane Greer, Ava Gardner, Bette Davis, and Rita Hayworth informed Klein's 'Film Noir' series of linocuts (1995-96). 'My absolute favourite *femme fatale* was Claire Trevor, known as the "Queen of Film Noir". Her portrayal of Helen Grayle in *Murder, My Sweet* [1944] was a huge influence on the characters I created for this series, one of the few that didn't evolve organically from previous work. It sprang directly from my love of film.'

<sup>3</sup> The stylised urban grit and nefarious doings are wonderfully conveyed by

<sup>3</sup> Directed by Edward Dmytryk, *Murder, My Sweet* was an adaptation of the Raymond Chandler novel *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940). Claire Trevor (1910-2000) is not as well remembered these days as some of her filmic contemporaries. She was thrice nominated for the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress (1937-54), winning for John Huston's 'Key Largo' (1948).

the stark monotone colour scheme with the occasional splash of blood red. 'The linocut was the ideal medium to capture my version of the dark, shadowy world of film noir,' Klein adds.

In *Femme Fatale* (1996) a stony-faced woman in a chic suit and veiled hat slips a smoking revolver back into her clutch bag, having expeditiously dispatched the chump who got in her way. A pensive atmosphere of surveillance, claustrophobia and psychological unravelling are suggested in works like *Mirror, Mirror* (1996) and *Watching You, Watching Me* (1995), in which two rivals coolly appraise each other in the confined plain of a mirror. 'Whatever the *femme fatales* lacked in moral fibre, they compensated for with an abundance of glamour, allure and street smarts. They had freedom and power, even if they were ill-gotten. They spoke their minds: and make no mistake, they were highly intelligent, often far more so than the guileless males they so easily led astray. They certainly made for more interesting viewing than the mousy ingénues they sometimes shared the screen with. I aimed to transfer something of their screen personas into my own work, along with some of the wry humour that is frequently a part of film noir.'

In 2009 Klein founded her boutique publishing project Moth Woman Press, which has developed into an important creative outlet for her work. 'It came into being when I was planning to make an artist's book

for the first time in many years. I knew that I would be asked by the bookbinder to come up with a publisher's name for the colophon page and I didn't want to have to compromise at the last minute with something boring and obvious!' Klein now distributes limited edition books and zines through a selection of bookshops and small galleries that she enjoys dealing with. 'All my publications are limited to small editions, so reaching a wide audience is not as crucial; it is primarily a labour of love. The first book, *There was once ... The Collected Fairy Tales* (2009), evolved from my pictures, but then the volumes took on a life of their own. Although it was suggested I approach a publisher with them, I elected to pursue the opportunity to publish them myself. The experience was not without its trials, but I learned a lot and was able to retain creative control. And as I am primarily an artist, not a writer, I was able to publish it and then get on with my artwork without too much interruption.'

The *Moth Woman Vigilantes* (2011), which made its début in one of Klein's zines, combines her etymological fascination with her film noir penchant, to create a tougher more hard-edged heroine. Not much of a comic book fan herself, these characters are derived more from old B-movies and serials, particularly the French silent film serial *Fantômas* (1913-14). Inevitably, Klein realises they will be perceived as more of a response to the dearth

of female super-heroes in the Marvel franchise and other pantheons, though she warns that hers are rather more subversive. 'These anonymous women with apparent super powers who, for reasons that are at this point unclear, have decided to take the law into their own hands. Are they on the side of Good or Evil? This is entirely in the eyes of the beholder ... it's fairly certain we haven't seen the last of them!'

After four years residing in the heart of Melbourne's CBD, Klein is in the process of relocating her practice to Ballarat in country Victoria in order to afford herself more room for her escalating list of projects. 'Ironically, it was the huge garage in the back garden that primarily attracted us to the property; potentially it is an ideal space for a studio, particularly a printmaking workshop, and some drying racks. It will be wonderful when it's finished, but the disruption to my work has been enormous and it will go on for some months more; I am simply not able to get enough done! As a mid-career artist, a major challenge I face is the increasing number of competing demands on my time. Getting the balance right between work and the world outside is a constant negotiation. All artists need to be wary of distractions that lead them too far from the studio. If they succumb too often, to paraphrase the great film director Billy Wilder, they are not working, they are just busy.'

Klein has deliberately cleared her schedule for 2012 to re-connect with

what is most vital within her artistic philosophy, and to reassert the primacy of the creative process. 'I feel very strongly about spending concentrated time in the studio; exhibiting may be seen as an extension of the process of art production, but it also takes time and energy away from it. The older I get, the more ideas I seem to have. A lifetime will not be enough to see through all the projects that I'd like to tackle, especially when ideas for new ones seem to crop up all the time.' Since she is unlikely to ever find herself bereft of inspiration, Deborah Klein's heroines will continue to beckon to us, neither as foreign nor as familiar as they appear to be, but ever-mutable and intriguing.



For more information about Deborah Klein visit: [www.deborahklein.net](http://www.deborahklein.net) & <http://deborahklein.blogspot.com>

Klein's publications are available from Moth Woman Press at: <http://mothwomanpress.blogspot.com>

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