Penelope Trotter

Club Visit

Sitting at home on any given night, it is almost certain that you can turn on your television and observe a life totally different from your own. Our interest in people’s lives and what goes on beyond closed doors is sparked by the ‘STAFF ONLY’ signs, and the ‘You Must Be This Tall To Go On The Ride’ signs, that tempt us to either disobey them, or create our own ideas of what they hide. What happens behind those doors? What goes on that is so secret that we normal folk cannot be privy?

Visual and Performance artist Penelope Trotter peers through these cracks and explores these worlds in her art practice. With years of performance art under her belt, Trotter has been working on a follow-up piece to her 2006 exhibition at Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, Narcissus of Liberty: a work that consists of a selection of photographs and prints, conceived from viewing the exterior of one of Melbourne’s exclusive single-sex clubs. The images from the show are Trotter’s own imaginings of what the interior of the club would look like.

A self-acknowledged feminist, Trotter is constantly aware of the division of the sexes in our politically-driven society. Her work focuses on the ‘historical materialism’ (1) of certain clubs, looking at the way they have been dictated throughout time (2) as she explores their place within contemporary society. Born from old money, the gentlemen’s clubs within Melbourne have been suspected of wielding a certain amount of social power over the years, due to the wealth status of its members, although recently one of the clubs has suggested that female members may begin to include women into their ranks, a step that would have them break out of their traditions and evolve into a new kind of power collective. While a small number of the club’s members were in support of this new step, the committee, for the most part, resists against such a proposition, its shoes firmly planted in their aristocratic history.

Trotter’s new body of work is a transition from the exploratory drawings of Narcissus of Liberty to an observational video piece. Trotter continues, under the guise of a young woman, with the performance aspect of her practice, as she documents an expenditure to one of Melbourne’s men-only clubs. With her starched tux, manly walk, arched eyebrows, and dour expression, Trotter makes a very convincing and confident-looking man. The novelty of the costume is what makes Trotter’s performance so theatrical, as she uses her spy tactics to infiltrate the areas that women are not supposed to tread.

Trotter’s invasive video begins with her initially walking around the city streets of Melbourne, doing her usual thing; street sounds come from all around, a few familiar faces are seen, and eventually she arrives at her destination. The introduction sets the scene for the following part of the video as the camera changes from the perspective of someone viewing the artist to the view from a peephole camera in her tie. This transition automatically gives the sense that we are looking at something that we are not supposed to see, as the images change from crisp clarity to a restricted, cloudy hole where shapes and objects appear. The images within the hole include a grand staircase, bookshelves, and various pieces of furniture. The indistinguishable nature of the forms create a certain amount of excitement as we are drawn into the frantic movement of the camera as Trotter walks around within the club. The excitement is heightened also, as at actual feels like we are being let in on a secret by viewing these highly guarded areas.
Club Visit. Penelope Trotter (2008)
Plate 48.

Penelope Trotter, Nice Interior, photograph, 758 x 570mm, 2008.
Plate 49.

Penelope Trotter, *Imagined Club Interior*, 472 x 355mm, photo etching, 2008.