

in conversation

This email interview was held between Mandy Conidaris and Celia de Villiers in December 2013. As a long-standing friend and colleague of Celia, Mandy is familiar with her working and thinking processes.

MC - This exhibition, *Size 5 shoes*, is just a small fragment of many years of your art production. It reflects your fascination with body politics, or identity politics, and you have explored this theme in much of your artwork. Although the shoes have a playful appearance, their references and associations relate to serious issues around this theme. Could you briefly describe some of these issues?

CdV - The philosopher Michel Foucault (1980:148) pointed out that the body is an “inscribed surface of events”. Due to humankind’s feelings of limitation and inadequacy medical science treats humanity as malleable material which is open to modification. The human body’s perceived ‘inadequacies’ have given rise to contemporary surgical interventions, designer bodies and Utopian fantasies containing biotechnology and neuro-technology.

Although it might seem as if such inadequacies are a modern concept, feelings of limitation are not new to human experience. Synthetic biology, medical technology interfacing with biology, and the symbiosis of human, animal & artificial intelligence has a precedent in chimeric and zoomorphic creatures of ancient global mythology. The concept of a nymph serves as an example; she took on one of three forms; a shapeshifting fish-woman (mermaid), an enticing bird-woman (harpy) or the seductive snake women (Lillith and Melusine). Some of the shoes in this collection allude to these historical myths, but also reference current bio-engineering.

MC - You speak of many individuals’ struggle for the ‘perfect’ human identity, while at the same time pointing out that the stresses and uncertainties in our contemporary culture lead often to confusion around what form this may take. Could you comment a little on this apparent dichotomy?

CdV - Many individuals have an idealised, unrealistic and mythical desire to exist within a situation of predictable unity and stability. However, Innovative individuals (including medical practitioners and artists) attempt to remove the ‘safety nets’ and ‘security blankets’ for themselves and their target audiences to speculate on new possibilities. Early twenty first century video Performance artists such as Pipilotti Rist and Stelarc have toyed with this concept of the relationship between Science and humanity the virtual and the actual. Current stressful socio political situations are subverted by fantasy, artifice, exaggerated, display and satire. Zombie theories and films like *The walking dead* demonstrate a fascination with the breakdown of social order and the place of violence and interventions in and post-apocalyptic aftermath (Berger 2013). Giorgio Agamben’s “state of exception” theory points to period of

crisis in which legality and constitution are suspended (Berger 2013). Therefore, the recent awareness of physical modifications and temporary or permanent alterations and attachments to the body have resulted in a consumer market that provides for these stylistic demands. Plastic surgery, tattoos, piercing and fetish-inspired attire are freely available and have now become part of fashion trends and 'street culture'.

MC - And your creative issues include cloning as well as scientific/medical interventions used to manipulate the physical body?

CdV - The performance artists Matthew Barney, Jack Parrow, Steven Cohen, Madonna and Lady Gaga have articulated appearance management trends and taken them to the extreme to become barometers of this era of the late twentieth and early twenty first century. Unlike, the classic body - the static, and idealistic - the adorned and exaggerated living bodies of the abovementioned artists are objects of their own making that are sometimes vulgar and exuberant and do not follow the norm.

MC - You state that present-day adornment is an aspect of 'appearance management' that is linked to identity formation, and is often a response/reaction to environmental and cultural triggers. Would you say a little more about the way these triggers manifest in our culture?

CdV - The attitudes exhibited towards the 'strange' or the 'odd' by contemporary society is a measure of the extent to which the Other can be accommodated into that society. The appearance management, costumes and disguises seen in the aforementioned examples have a dual function: These shoes are a display for the viewer of what might constitute one element of identity formation and persona, but they also serve a critical function. By means of bizarre costumes and provocative behaviour artists sometimes flaunt Otherness in order to irk conservative and prejudiced viewers. Magnifying the stigmatisation of the Other is a strategy to questioning social hierarchies. I concur with David Napier (1992:141), the author of *Foreign bodies, Performance art and symbolic anthropology*, which considers the concept of the stranger "the central metaphor for - any discussions of the body".

MC - The foot is such a vulnerable part of the body – needing the ability to freely articulate its many joints if it is to perform its biological function of motion – yet it is often forced into constricting foot ware that leaves the wearer potentially defenceless. Also, the foot has been eroticised in certain cultures, leading to the decorative female shoe becoming an object of fetish, in particular the high-heeled shoe. Could you elaborate on this in terms of your choice of the shoe as a metaphor for identity construction within contemporary Western society?

CdV - The devices of masquerade and adornment are fundamental elements in identity formation, but also serve as a tool in an artist's critical function. The sculpted, overtly artificial shoes alert us to the fact that identity construction is ambivalent as we mostly assume that

behind a person's crafted facade or mask there is an authentic identity which in itself might be a misleading assumption.

Contemporary cultural anxieties, desires and pre-occupations include the often eroticised fetishized interface between technology and the flesh. Fetishism has associations with medieval Christianity, Freudian psychology with its sexual basis, as well as contemporary popular cultural ideas about sado-masochism and taboo erotic practices. However, my resin shoes also refer to the Freudian theory of a shoe as a libidinalised object which in the colder light of science have reproductive implications of cloning and hybrids.

In our current society it has become acceptable for sexually provocative signification to be created with the help of prosthetics and physical alterations. An extension of this phenomenon was evidenced by the decorative designer prosthetics and costumes worn by disabled athletes in the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympics.

MC - You have also researched the Baroque and Neo-baroque art movements in depth and have integrated this sensibility into your artwork. These two movements share the common characteristics of a delight in provoking a spectacle or a sensory response or experience; and by consciously referring to the theatrical, creating a sense of drama and anxiety. Your shoes have these qualities of the sensory and theatricality and may trigger the viewer's imagination, provoking a sense of tension. This unease is due in part to the viewer's recognition of their practical unwearability and all the associations raised by that realisation. Could you comment further?

CdV - The aesthetics of this body of work foregrounds the illusionary nature of the world as a theatre, where truth, reality and the dream are convoluted. Suggestive of both historical baroque and Neo- Baroque is the suspension of values, and phenomena in a process of transformation. The Neo-Baroque intention is to reinvent the status quo by subverting power roles and deconstructing hegemonic binaries. Therefore, the viewer of Neo-Baroque is challenged to become critically engaged.

Due to social conditions there has been an upsurge in the sensibility of shock and a fascination with disturbing spectacles - it has been proven that the strongest emotion is an emotion of distress. Our fascination with indeterminate phenomena, such as represented by my shoes, is in essence with its play between complexity and redundancy. When engaging with the aesthetics of Neo-Baroque and Neo-Gothic sensibilities viewers must be willing to have their expectations contradicted, understanding intersected, and to follow divergent paths, forcing him/her to discover their own meaning within the metaphoric 'folds'.

MC Another feature of the Baroque and Neo-baroque was the deliberate creation of objects that were/are extravagant and excessively detailed. Although your shoes initially appear not to be elaborately decorated, their shapes are exaggerated and push the

boundaries of reality. In addition, the choice of cast and polished resin speak of a sophisticated understanding of a technique and contemporary materials that are appropriate for your concept. Could you briefly discuss your exploration of the shapes of these shoes – why they have the visual structure that they do - and your making process and material choice?

CdV - Baroque implies an architecture, art or music of extravagance, impetuosity and virtuosity, all of which are concerned with stirring the affections and senses of the individual. In spite of our admiration for the Baroque churches and opera houses today, the theorist Angela Ndalianis (2004:7) explains that in the 18th and even into the 19th century, Baroque aesthetics were regarded as “possessing traits that were unusual, vulgar, exuberant and beyond the norm” and that particular era was regarded by many as “a decline of the classical and harmonious ideal”. In response to this concept I explore the aesthetics of the sublime of ‘delightful horror’. The tactile qualities and sensual shapes are deliberately seductive and are aimed at stimulating the desire to stroke the shoes, but they have a sense of aversion-attraction due to the animalistic hybrid forms and implications of ‘Gothicised’ creatures included in them.

Nevertheless, our attention is repeatedly drawn to the skilful execution and complexity of meaning in historical Baroque artworks. Resin casting requires a well finished prototype, good mould-making skills and precision casting to avoid cracks. The finishing demands hours of sanding and polishing by hand and with correct electronic equipment. I strive to use contemporary materials and tools, but live up to the standards set by the versatile and competent artisans of the 17th century. I agree with trend predictors like Li Edelkoort, Faith Popcorn and Manuel Castells who believe that in our rushed, digital and automated age there will be an increased yearning for well crafted, handmade artefacts.

MC - Which artists working today within the Neo-baroque genre do you respect?

CdV - Adriana Varejão, Daniela Rosell, Urs Fischer and Diana Thater.

MC - And finally, why Size ‘5’ shoes?

CdV - I collect antique shoe-lasts and wooden hat moulds. My first shoe was based on my favourite elegant wooden shoe-last which happened to be a size 5. I started adding heels and all the other sculptures evolved from that original prototype. I am continuously altering the colours and shapes and recently started adding stainless steel and brass laser cut elements as well.

Thank you Celia.