

# Julie Rrap: Body Double

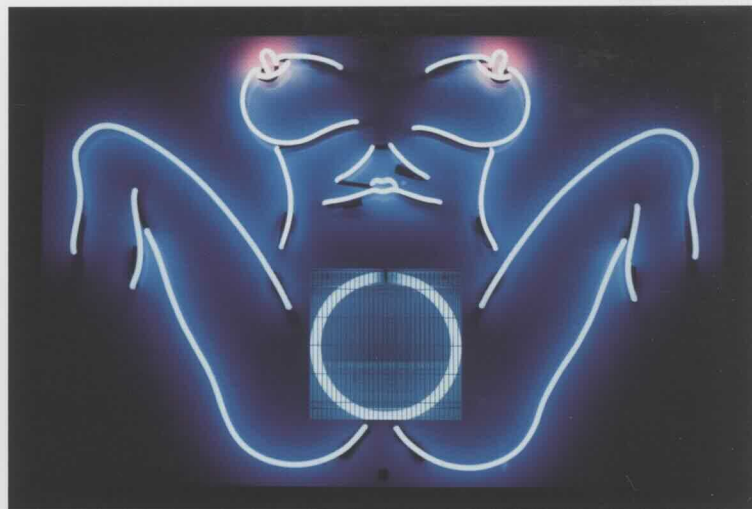
Joanna Mendelssohn

**Julie Rrap, O, 1999**, Perspex, neon, insect zapper, sound, approx. 70 x 123 x 20 cm, courtesy the artist and Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

The **George street entrance** of Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) is where an exhibition's tone is set, where artists can make their defining statements to an audience of passers-by. In the case of Julie Rrap the work was *O*, 1999, a fluorescent electric insect zapper placed at the central point of a spread-legged female torso. Curiously, the pose is the same as in Pat Larter's mail art *Oh-pun legs* from the 1970s and 1980s, but while Larter's is handmade in her sense of bawdy, Rrap's is elegant, machine-made and ironic.

While individual works by Rrap can best be described as iconic in their status in Australian art, this exhibition and accompanying monograph from Piper Press is the first time her oeuvre has been sifted and moulded by one of the great curators, Victoria Lynn, into a coherent assessment of her career. 'Body Double' therefore is a grouping of the familiar, with some surprises. The familiar includes *Overstepping*, 2001, that magnificent tribute to female elegance and pain. Then there is *Marilyn (A-R-MOUR)*, 2000, where the famous *Seven Year Itch* shot of Marilyn Monroe is both impersonated by the artist (à la Cindy Sherman) and transformed. Her Marilyn is flirty but confident, with none of the seductive vulnerability that was at the core of the original. Instead, the constructed skirt, dress and wig serve as a protective device: dress-ups become armour. But the skirt is made of glass, which can shatter; the wig is too brittle to survive an assault. Armour is not necessarily a defence. In other works in this series, *Camouflage #3 Elizabeth*, 2000, sees her posed as Elizabeth Taylor in *National Velvet*, but with horses hooves instead of hands, while *Camouflage #2 (Raquel)* shows her as a mutated Raquel Welch from *Barbarella*. She is constantly aware of the artist as performer, acting out, manipulating, showing that image is everything.

Rrap is revealed as a consistently intelligent artist, combining wit with knowledge to appraise the world. She is from the generation that had to deal with the embedded sexist attitudes of the 1950s and 1960s, and the consequent liberation of feminism in the 1970s. For Rrap's generation of young women there was no societal assumption of equal rights, and so the ideas and values that are now accepted as the norm were considered as new and original. This then is the context for her 1980 series 'Persona and



Shadow', based on reworked images from Edvard Munch: photographing herself in poses from his iconic works, splintering them and reworking the fragments, thus perfectly capturing the dilemma of lives caught in transition.

What is clear through this exhibition and monograph is the level of intelligence, as well as knowledge that Rrap brings to her work. It is not just the referencing of art history, the ironic but intelligent commentary on both the traditions and interpretations of different works, and indeed the way Rrap inserts herself into all these different narratives, but also the sense of process. In *Disclosures: A photographic construct*, 1982, the stark full-frontal photographic images of the artist, the 'torn' contrast between monochrome and colour, and the very making of the work, compete for attention. For all her high finish – and Rrap's mature works are indeed elegant – the viewer never loses the sense that this art has been deliberately made. This is seen at its most extreme in *Body rub*, 2006, where silicon rubber casts of her head are used to rub full-size photographic images, creating a personal and immediate work out of the apparently mechanical act of photography.

The viewer is given access to the secrets of making, as well as the alchemy of the made. Although Rrap is rightly honoured for her photographs, some of these works are photographic records of other creations. In *Honey ants (porous bodies)*, 1999, she creates a drawing of a female torso in honey, and videos ants as they eat into the shape. *Bone mandala*, 1999, uses human bones, including a skull, to make mystic magic, while *Horse's tale*, 1999, swishes a tail out of a woman's buttocks.

Following on from her early self-searching photographic pieces, Rrap's most recent installation work, *Body double*, 2007, shows her technical mastery as the projected image of a dancer moves between male and female silicon models. There is also an underlying sense of ambiguity, with the body shown as an object which can be discarded and replaced at will. It is an appropriate ambivalence for an artist who has long used her own body as both a tool and a vehicle for carrying ideas, subordinating it to her will in the same way as other artists continue to use a paint and brush.

**Julie Rrap: Body Double**, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 30 August 2007 – 28 January 2008.