

Behind Joan Sutherland

On one record cover reads ‘The world of Joan Sutherland’ below a reproduction of the opera diva herself. Posing for the camera, she looks out with her superhuman eyes affirmed by the many viewers who are likely to look back. The covers that make up the 2010-12 series of *Kill your idols* are cultural artefacts of sorts. These once-loved-now-forgotten possessions symbolise the fickle nature of our human interests, highlighting how easily we discard small treasures. For Sarah Contos the record covers remain to be *seen*. Individually titled with names such as *Joan Sutherland*, *Olivia Newtown John*, *Barry Crocker* and *Kamahl*, they are worked over with coloured beading, fake gems and shiny sequins. Ready-mades embellished by needlepoint.

In this exhibition, entitled *My eyes through your mountains*, the ‘same old personalities’ from *Kill your idols* reappear.¹ The artist has resurrected them from their twilight fate. Record covers, screen-printed silk scarves and hand-carved wood sculptures stand-in for the ‘real deal’. As you enter the dimly lit room you see glazed ceramics looking like crude figures that seem to drip from their self-made wooden stands. At first glance you want to laugh. Why does Kamahl have flowers growing from his head? Why is Olivia Newton John a light stand? And when did Joan Sutherland expose her breasts? The celebrity subjects are no longer themselves. They become mysterious. You question their authenticity. Like fake replicas, imported from overseas.

The title of *King Kamahl (Spring Reprise)*, an ikebana-inspired assemblage from 2012, suggests a natural cycle with coded references to sexual reproduction. At other times, the artist has spoken of ‘turning one type of icon into another’. Looking at the artwork you see a stack of vintage tables that support Kamahl’s head. Is this a clever plinth? I see a Ziggurat or, in the artist’s own words, a ‘totem pole’. The reference here to different cultures makes the artistic strategy of cultural appropriation a vexed one. Is the artist mixing cultural traditions and aesthetic forms that are not her own or, more hopefully, is she *looking again* at one’s own culture with reference to a different one? Maybe *King Kamahl (Spring Reprise)* and its seemingly apolitical arrangement of native flora is really an attempt to flip Australian cultural identity on its head.

This rearrangement of culture reappears in *Summer, Winter, Autumn* by the repeated image of Joan Sutherland brought together in a set of one-colour screen-prints from 2012. In developing this work the artist has spoken of time spent in Arizona and New Mexico and, in particular, the stylistic influence of Navajo arts and craft on this work. Like the record covers you see this influence expressed through the needlework—beading patterns around the eyes, mouth and breasts. While Contos often returns to the same images, she regularly alters them so that they are never entirely the same. What may be recognisable as Joan Sutherland’s face may not make sense when looking at the full picture. To my mind, this cut-and-paste approach that dissects and re-assembles recalls collages by Hannah Höch and Ellen Gallanger, but without the forcefulness of their political intent, Contos instead unpicks her own identity.

And what is this work with the same title of the exhibition? A leather belt frames a painting on raw canvas. A silk scarf—Joan Sutherland again—draping from a mouth? Looking at the concentric circles reminds me of central desert painting mapping the land, but they could easily be eyes attempting to hypnotise the viewer, locking our attention, you see a landscape turning into a woman’s breasts.

Joel Mu

¹ This and subsequent quotes are by the artist. Email conversation with the author from 4 November 2012.

A bull fighter in Xanadu - Marian Tubbs

‘Why don’t you get a job and go to work?’ he said.
‘I don’t want to work,’ Manuel said. ‘I’m a bull fighter.’
‘There aren’t any bull fighters anymore,’ Retana said.
‘I’m a bull fighter.’¹

Luscious nostalgia. Dripping.

The meeting of an ocean and a sea reflects a moon that remembers.²

EVERYTHING.

Amongst other things, Sarah mines (an Australian thing to do).

Past lives.

Of Australian idols (before those words together became another cultural cliché).

The star of Xanadu turned on with neon, banksias and waratahs sprouting from a wooden bust of Kamahl. The screenprinted sarongs - that remind me of my mother’s only attire in the Queensland heat – hanging casually off canvases as if cast off on the way to the pool or in a moment of passion.

Everything is exotic here, and everything is familiar.

An Australian - not necessarily well-to-do but very bohemian - household. So retro its current. Maybe Contos refuses to entertain the Australian cultural cringe, the never ending provincial problem, or better she.

Loves to suffer with it.

As an artist and a friend, I’ve come to know Sarah’s use of the word BEAUTY, and how it increases in frequency when we’ve had a few. Entertainment icons that passed their peak in our youth, Sarah sees as markers of mysterious beauty.

Their glistening tides still coming in, as she decides on who a warm moon chooses to linger.

Hemingway, with his wounded bullfighters, alcoholic jockeys, and war vets also used art to unlock an awareness in us that is more than nostalgia. Sometimes I think I’ve figured it out, but then I keep looking.

¹ Hemmingway, Ernest. *The Undeclared*, Great Britain, Arrow Books, 1944, p224

² For the record I know nothing about moons or astrology, I am just looking at ours rise over the said bodies of water as I write this. Sarah is the kind of person that makes me want to cull some of my cynicism and learn how to open up a chakra.