

# MODERN PAINTERS

INTERNATIONAL ARTS AND CULTURE NOVEMBER 2005

## Brides of Frankenstein

San Jose Museum of Art

31 JULY – 30 OCTOBER

It's rare to walk into a show nowadays that advertises itself with phrases like 'digital art' and 'new media' and feel that you're actually learning something about our age, or getting a feel for the tones and structures available to artists right now. Thanks to Marcia Tanner's curatorial shrewdness, however, *Brides of Frankenstein* manages to offer both those experiences: each of the artists represented has a bit of Mary Shelley in her and explores how innovation carries the potential both to enhance and to threaten our lives.

One such threat of innovation comes from its tendency to displace its own best breakthroughs. Although Tanner includes some up-to-the-moment installations by artists like Heidi Kumao and Gail Wight, some of the most striking pieces in the show date from a few years ago. In a genre of art that seems to move at rocket speed, it's refreshing to see such works culled for their strength and nuance and not just their quicksilver topicality.

Kristin Lucas's video, *Involuntary Reception* (2000), for instance, has a wonderfully oddball, sci-fi premise. A young woman, played by the artist herself, has been invaded by electrical forces. She's become both the victim of this excess voltage and an almost Delphic 'transmitter'. We see her on split screens, each of which cuts intermittently to a sequence of other images. Her monologue patches in and out: 'What can I say? ... I'm receiving all kinds of signals all the time ... sonar, radar, electromagnetic...' Much of the thrill of the video comes from Lucas's comic gift and her mingling of wry humour with genuine pathos. At one point, while an image of schooling koi fills one screen, and as the character speaks of the difficulty of vacationing in her new electrical state, she states in perfect deadpan, 'Swimming's a problem.' As the film progresses, the anonymous woman becomes a cipher for any individual's isolation and engagement, for any person's attempts to navigate the gaps of static between the self and the world. Despite the seemingly affectless tenor of the monologue, Lucas proves herself a master tonalist. The deadpan offers her a base from which she can produce a subtle gradation of tones, from satirical to sincere, from melancholic to awestruck.

Certainly the most impressive of the better-known artists represented

is Elizabeth King. On show here are photographs and a video of a jointed and movable sculpture called *Pupil* (1987-90), whom King has based on her own attributes and modelled out of porcelain, brass, Swiss pear-wood and glass. This sculpture may seem futuristic, yet it returns us to the most ancient questions about what it means to be human. In the video *What Happened* (1991), made in collaboration with Richard Kizu-Blair, she shows us exactly how our faces roll upward as we smell, how our fingers and eyes move in delicate tandem as we sense objects in front of us, how our eyes flit across a surface as we try to read the images before us. By asking her viewers to reconsider these specific technical operations of the body itself, King exposes the force that summons all the constituent parts into motion. Her entire project seems an attempt to animate, a word that at its root means to give soul. That may sound vague or sentimental, but King achieves her grand feat through exquisite attention to detail. You leave her work feeling you could see an insect move a mile away.

So often, work bearing the tag 'experimental art' amounts to little more than the repeated execution of a set idea. But, nothing could be further from the methods of the best artists in *Brides of Frankenstein*. Tanner has selected not necessarily the newest of the new, but the best of the new. These genuine experimenters bring the viewer to a place where uncertainty traffics with wonder. They employ their new methods and materials not to advertise their own innovation, but to reactivate our curiosity. Is it significant that all of these artists are women? Maybe not. But even considered as a small survey of art in mixed media, this exhibition seems to show us the better half. PC

