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Jane Burton: *I Did It for You*

Centre for Contemporary Photography,
Melbourne

28 October to 17 December

Reviewed by Kyla McFarlane

Take a drive out of Melbourne and you'll quickly see that its sprawling suburbs now stretch well beyond the familiarity of Howard Arkley's Oakleigh. Now they seep out west and south-east towards a strange edge-space, where the new housing estates with their lakes and 'lifestyle' sit close to low-rent motels, factories, fast food outlets and vacant hinterland.

Whatever the reality of life in this suburban fringe it's a locale that, in our media-fuelled collective imagination, has quickly become associated with mythologies of concealment and crime made possible by its position on the city's outer limits. In *I Did It for You*, recently exhibited at Melbourne's Centre for Contemporary Photography, Jane Burton sets a nocturnal narrative in just such a liminal realm. Her series of black and white photographs begin (or end?) with an indistinct image of a young woman, perhaps the person to whom the title of the work is addressed. Around this, hung three sequences of photographs suggestive of illicit meetings and after-dark activity. Together, these shadowy motel exteriors and anonymous figures convey a mood of undefined guilt and grubby intrigue.

I Did It for You certainly has the capacity to spook. Its power comes not from the direct telling of a story, because Burton has purposefully left gaping holes in her narrative.

Instead, it emerges from the mood suggested by its pervasive, leaking darkness, small pools of artificial light picking out shadowy details in the mise en scène and the selective placement of solitary players amid the gloom. As viewers, we lurked on the threshold of these scenes, assuming a role akin to a voyeur-detective. We observed details such as a parked car or female figure appearing at a curtained window, seemingly unaware that she might be under surveillance. This veiled figure is a very familiar trope for Burton, but in this context its presence was particularly resonant.

On the wall opposite, was a picture of a man under a running shower with his eyes closed. His drenched and immobile figure suggest myriad possibilities - is the shower post-coital, or does it wash away the evidence of a crime - or both? In this image, Burton cleverly moves into the interior and our point of view shifts accordingly. And our reference points shift with it, to sources as diverse as Lady MacBeth's inability to erase the incriminating presence of blood from her hands to the shower scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

Narrative and noir have always hung around the edges of Jane Burton's photographs and her work has the potential to lapse into a simple recreation of the filmic tropes it draws upon. However, *I Did It for You* is more than just a series of stills gleaned from a filmic memory. The imagined narratives that, for me, came to mind quickly and vividly in the presence of these photographs originate as much from the local mythologies of the suburban fringe as they do from our experience of the films of Hitchcock or Lynch. It's the evocation of this tangle of references, both local and global, 'real' and 'imagined', that make *I Did It for You* so compelling.

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John Gillies: *Video Works*

Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts
24 November to 18 December

Reviewed by Leon Marvell

The French film-maker Robert Bresson once wrote in his notebook:

The power your (flattened) images have of showing things as they are. The same image

different image ten times.

This potential of images to affect us differently each time we encounter them is one of the most fascinating aspects of the work of image-makers. If we couple this profusion of possible responses with the manipulation of the image made available by film and video technologies, then the complexity of aesthetic engagement becomes mind-boggling.

Given John Gillies has been producing video work for the past 25 years - and that his work has received extensive critical attention - it may appear churlish to begin a review with vague musings about the resistance of images to fixed interpretation. At the risk of digging myself deeper into a hole, I will introduce my experience of Gillies' mini-retrospective at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts with another observation from Bresson:

Today I was not present at a projection of images and sounds; I was present at the visible and instantaneous action they were exerting on one another and at their transformation. The bewitched reel.

I don't suppose Bresson was playing on the double meaning of reel: a spool and a dance. Nonetheless it is dance that seems most strongly to inform the most successful works in this exhibition: *Techno/Dumb/Show* (1991) and *Test* (1992). Both were produced with the participation of the innovative dance/performance company the Sydney Front.

In *Techno/Dumb/Show* Gillies orchestrates a dizzying collage of bodily and facial expressions that collide, interpenetrate and transform one another in just the way Bresson describes. The gestures of the performers draw upon silent film, reminding one of the idealisation of character and the expressionist experiments of early 20th-century cinema. In particular this work reminded me of moments in the films of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein, but most particularly of Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia*. Mid-shots of actors running on the spot, chiaroscuro lighting and shots of faces in a massed crowd inevitably evoked the balletic rhythm of her editing in the film of the 1936 Olympic Games.

Yet Gillies' best work seems to draw on an aesthetic far removed from 20th-century experimental cinema. Had the artists of Byzantium been given a video camera, perhaps they would have produced something like *Techno/Dumb/Show* and *Test*. These two works are composed in a mosaic of visual fragments

John Gillies
Techno/Dumb/Show
1991 videotape made
in collaboration with
The Sydney Front

