

## **Bronwyn Platten • *Love Maps 2003***

**by Ken Bolton**

**Bronwyn Platten • *Love Maps and Shadow Play* • 12 September – 11 October, 2003 • Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide**

*Love Maps and Shadow Play* was the second in an ongoing series of exhibitions from Platten treating and researching conceptions of love, erotica, the erotic and desire. Where the previous exhibition had looked at Asian, European and American sex-museums' conceptions of the erotic and sexual (*The Museum of Love & Romance*, at CACSA in 2001), this exhibition dealt with some conceptions of romantic love and the metaphorical modes by which love and romance are imagined in the West. Where the previous exhibition dealt with 'limit-case' instances as well as the typical, *Love Maps* dealt more in the serviceably normative.

The exhibition utilized two rooms within the EAF gallery. One darkened room had a number of filmed works, projected to wall-size and on continuous rotation. These were meditative and suggested, dreamy, subjective contemplation—or even fretting—and practical, perfunctory dealing with the business of sex and love—and with journeyings, ideas of life and love as search, yearning, destiny.

To different degrees the films indicated, and gave substantiality to, these themes—as, variously, mood, thought and action. Although it is possible to describe the films as making propositions of various kinds they functioned in the exhibition as a source of emotion and gravitas that the other half of the show depended upon and refracted more abstractly. The films were called 'Isabel', after the artist's great grandmother who lived in the Orkneys. Some sequences traced a slow path through a seaside village to (presumably) this woman's door, focusing on the cobblestones and arriving at the base of the door—retracing actual footsteps. The material conditions, and the social conditions, that would have shaped Isabel's life. Others showed the wake of what we would presume to be the ferry from island to mainland or vice versa and yet another showed the island headland shrouded in mist. These last were very beautiful and suggested

inchoate longing, reflection, sadness or serenity. Other sequences showed a young woman naked on a narrow bed thinking, daydreaming, wondering—later showing the same woman examining her body (moles, folds of skin). Another sequence showed the scaling and gutting of a fish. The slit made in the fish seemed sexual—a cliché, but this was also the practical preparation of food, abandoning what the other sequences might have suggested as more sweetly romantic images of the feminine for the no-nonsense ‘work’ of being a woman and suggesting there was something of this about the ‘work’ of sex, too.

The other room showed a number of more concrete objects. A girl’s notepad (scaled-up to four or five feet in height), with its implied secrets and imaginings, corroborates some of the filmic sequences—as having or implying a like content. A goofy ‘map’ of the ‘Oedipus Island’ (looking much like a bra, with maddened ‘eye’ nipples), rather than suggesting sentimentalized ideas of love, the erotic, and romance etcetera, shifted to the register of ribald, Mel Brooks-style humour: the looming, mesmerizing mammaries, the ludicrously portentous *Cape of Love*, *Bay of Destinies*, *Cape of Shame*, *Bay of Rapture*, all indicated on the map, the *Ocean of Indifference*, the *Lapping Sea* and *Repression Point*.

The bra cups’ concentric wiring (contour lines suggesting height and gradient of the volcanic breast-mountains) was indicated by continuous lines of type: the words “envelope” and “elope” joined together. The bra or breasts, as a shape, also suggested a rorschach blot, having the same symmetry. All cornball popular indicators of ‘the Freudian’, the ‘psychological’. But perhaps these are the tools with which we do consider love and the psychic life.

In the centre of the room hung a large sheet of 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century-styled decorative curlicues and *fleur-de-lys* patterns that suggested feminine margin decorations, sewing or embroidery patterns, but suggested as well an anatomised ‘body’ (face, hands, genitals, legs and feet). Finally, looking very Louise Bourgeois, a ladder of ‘H’s’ leading up to an ‘O’ (orgasm? or romantic ladder to a balcony and elopement or seduction?) leaned against the wall, made of plastic probably but suggesting polished bone.

The key deposition in this section of the gallery was the video of Platten re-enacting the action or iconography of an obscure allegorical work by Hans

Baldung in which a naked female figure walks, with the aid of long sticks, upon two balls or spheres. (The sticks and the balls Platten had herself used in the filming—looking rather kinky in the ‘adult shop’ manner— stood near the video.) In this, Platten, naked, negotiates an endless stretch of harsh South Australian beach, with very great difficulty. The viewer expects her to fall at any moment, or to stop. But she goes on (and the film is in fact a loop, though of a quite long sequence of punishing ambulation). The video performance provided a further metaphor for love as journey and ‘work’, love as sacrifice and achievement. Duration, where the word conveys both the sense of ‘time’ and the sense of “hard”, of its being ‘difficult’. Reproduced on the exhibition’s invitation and publicity, this image on the small screen was an anchoring, hermeneutic chord that set something of the tone of the exhibition and bridged the two halves of the show—the same filmic medium as in the other room, but with performance art’s asperity and summary quality of metaphor, of the illustrative or of demonstration.

Overall the show was lyrical in feel. And very light: there were few ‘objects’ in the show and all pointed directly to ideas, away from their material facture or the collectability or allure of art objects. The effect was pleasingly cerebral and the cerebration pleasurably indirect and meditative. *Love Maps* also had the effect of reclaiming and ‘redeeming’ the works of the earlier exhibition.