

The Original of Laura

Chelsea Lehmann

This exhibition explores the iconoclastic gesture as a secular, creative act enacted on the painted surface. The exhibition takes its title from Vladimir Nabokov's last novel *The Original of Laura*, a work of fiction he was writing at the time of his death in 1977. The manuscript was posthumously published some thirty years later and was both lauded as being "filled with sly wit and memorable images"[1] and lambasted as "various burps of senilia, some brilliantly ripe." [2] In any case, when Nabokov died, *Laura* was a mere skeleton, a fragmented collection of index cards containing little beyond the basic plot and threads of narrative yet to be fleshed out.

"Efface / expunge / erase / delete / rub out / X / wipe out / obliterate," reads the by-now famous last index card: "one verb or phrase of annihilation from the list has been quite literally scratched out - and equally absent, as critics will not tire of pointing out, is most of the novel." [3] This last card was probably instructional; Nabokov was known to be a perfectionist and had made it clear that upon his death, all unfinished work should be destroyed. In any case, the tone of this card certainly suits what remained of the narrative. The story attempts an imaginative exploration of death, where death is an erotic and artistic experience. One of several working titles for the novel was "Dying Is Fun."

There is no missing it: sex = death. Considering how little there is of Laura, it is astonishing how much of the material is spent reinforcing the cliché: see the "more than masturbatory joy" of self-erasure (139) [...] and the claim that "the process of dying by auto-dissolution afforded the greatest ecstasy known to man" (171) ... [4]

The story of *The Original of Laura* and its structural fragmentation literally and figuratively allude to the iconoclastic gesture. The many references to erasure and the eponymous protagonist's elusive original remind us of what is absent or may become so, and this is amplified by the incomplete nature of the book. In *Laura*, Nabokov mocks his own characters as well as the cultural, theoretical and philosophical milieu that he wrote within. Most of all, he mocks himself-the figure of his own speech, the broader figure of text as a mythogenic construct, even

the human figure becomes a metaphor for a kind of literary necrophilia. In the voice of one of the lead characters Philip Wild, ('an enormously corpulent scholar'[5]) "*I hit upon the art of thinking away my body, my being, mind itself. To think away thought - luxurious suicide, delicious dissolution!*" (243). [6]

The iconoclastic gesture mocks the image. Like the sex-death drive it is underpinned by the twin impulses of seduction and erasure. The so-called 'bad faith' of images[7], their double-dealing as both revealing and deceiving invites the situational scrutiny of the iconoclastic act to radically shift meaning; mobilising relations between material, image and haptic force. The image, having been deliberately maimed and reordered is teased and tested in its ability to represent. In this discussion, art historical and contemporary images of the body are situated at this moving nexus of material, image and haptic

interference in order to explore ways in which iconoclasm is affective.

Art historian Richard Clay proposes that iconoclasm is a form of "sign transformation" which he defines more specifically as the "moment in ongoing processes of discursive sign transformation that precede, accompany and proceed from moments of physical breaking". [8] He states that historically, iconoclasts were not mere vandals; rather "they understood art in very sophisticated ways and they used alteration of it as a way of mediating complex power struggles they were deeply passionate about." [9]

An iconoclastic approach to image making can emerge in contemporary artistic practice despite, or perhaps because of the fact that "we are a museum going generation who have been brought up to think about art's value in particular ways" [10]. In the process of critique, attacking one's own art can

dislodge its internal power structure and the particular holding ground of images within one's oeuvre. Like the 18th Century iconoclast, "who understood art in very sophisticated ways" the artist understands the operations of their artwork and can deliberately derail it-a passionate, if individualistic, power struggle in which the stakes are mostly personal.

In Nabokov's novel-within-the-novel (entitled *My Laura*) the character Ivan Vaughan effectively kills his mistress by writing her. There are also "a scattering of minor characters and back stories [which] involve love-murders and love-suicides." [11] In the artworks for this exhibition, erasure more or less paints the picture and the love-hate-death trajectory of iconoclastic mediation 'kills the original'. In this process the stamp of authorship shifts away from stylistic tropes and formal sensibilities to the haptic trace as an index of 'self-erasure', a step along the road to killing the author.

Bodies are excessively represented and surveyed for all kinds of reasons. At the same time the insistent ubiquity of images of the body in mass culture dulls our attention to them, particularly when one considers the homogenising effects of imaging strategies used in advertising. Clearly, this invites mediation through artistic means to generate new meanings, but it can also summon the desire to simply destroy, a form of mediation that brings about a quick death, a contestation of power that leaves behind an empty artefact. Is it possible to trigger an empathic response when the iconoclastic gesture is enacted on a painted body? Do we sense this destruction more acutely because we are viewing it with our own bodies or do we simply detect that meaning has been snuffed out and emptied and we await instructions to 'see' again; a critique without outcome-another form of seduction and annulment.

Affect in relation to the reception of art has become increasingly theorised. Susan Best in her recent book, *Visualizing Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-garde* (2014) looks at "the way in which art remains subjective and concerned with feeling, even when artists explicitly reject such qualities and responses." [12] Affect becomes particularly pointed when images of the



Chelsea Lehmann, 'Sondage' (2015) oil and enamel on linen, 103 x 81cm

body are employed, and it is not surprising that many of the artists Best describes as creating affectively engaging art are those who use their own bodies as the primary vehicle for expression such as Ana Mendieta and Francesca Woodman.

The iconoclastic gesture enacted on the painted body may elicit a complex affect in the viewer. On the one hand, it violently interferes with an image, metaphorically signifying maiming or death. This may create many affects in the viewer such as sympathy sensations, or feelings of oppression and disempowerment. On the other hand, it points us back to the artifice of image making in all its material and processual liveliness, somewhat of an antidote to those sensations. The iconoclastic gesture also implicates the agency of a more simple critique by exposing the double-dealing of images, particularly 'stock' images within an artist's oeuvre.

In the abovementioned cases, the iconoclastic gesture is seen to have affect, even if it may seem paradoxical, i.e. to feel something in response to 'nothing' (if erasure equals death). This may be partly due to the act itself being so loaded and partly because, being affected by an artwork that has been physically reduced or moderated over time is to be simultaneously affected by its augmentation through its reference to multiple episodes of material engagement.

With such an obvious distortion of content, comes a problematisation of the particular contract between author and reader and this ambiguity informs the paintings in this exhibition: **What is there? What was there? What has been taken away? What continues?**

[1] McAlpin, Heller (November 18, 2009). "The Original of Laura". Christian Science Monitor. Accessed 22.3.15 <http://www.csmonitor.com/Books/Book-Reviews/2009/1118/the-original-of-laura>

[2] "Herring-Hawker's Cry" blog. Accessed 22.3.15 http://rejeopardize.rssing.com/chan-2115838/all_p1.html

[3] Marijeta Bozovic, *Love, Death, Nabokov: Looking For The Original of Laura*, Nabokov Online Journal, Vol. V (2011), p. 1.

[4] Ibid, p. 6

[5] Marsh, Stefanie (February 14, 2008). "Vladimir Nabokov, his masterpiece and the burning question". The Times. Retrieved 20.3.15

[6] ibid.

[7] This idea comes from *Mythologies*, Barthes semiology study on the process of myth creation.

Chelsea Lehmann, 2015

The Abandoned Room

The painting *Threshold* (below) is photographed in the ambiguous context of an abandoned room in which a few objects, no longer in use, have been left, like monuments to their former function. Placing the painting in this context signifies the process of abandonment or obsolescence, suggesting the wilfully deserted or erased paintings that were visually compromised, but still extant underneath the surface. These layers become an archive of iconoclastic gestures and material processes.

I am exploring the layers of this painting in both non-destructive ways (scientific imaging techniques) and destructive ways, for instance, gestures of erasure like scraping, stripping off paint, and over-painting. I aim to 'open up' the surface as a live field of data by using the lens of technology and conversely my own physical and performative interferences to explore relations between layers of paint and between images and their iconographic tendencies.



Chelsea Lehmann, 'Threshold' (2012-2014) oil on linen, 105 x 96 cm. Photography by Docqment.



Chelsea Lehmann, 'The Original of Laura' (2014-15) oil and enamel on board, 50 x 50cm

Chelsea Lehmann holds a Bachelor of Visual Art (hons) from Adelaide Central School of Art (1998) and was a visiting scholar at Glasgow School of Art, Scotland (1999) courtesy of the Ruth Tuck Scholarship. She has an MFA (Research) from the College of Fine Art, UNSW (2007) and is currently a PhD candidate at UNSW Art & Design supported by the Australian Post-graduate Award. Lehmann has been the recipient of several awards, grants and local and International residencies and has exhibited widely in Australia and internationally. Her research focuses on the use of scientific imaging techniques such as x-ray and infrared to expose hitherto unknown conjunctures of images within the painted surface. Her aim is to highlight relations between layers of material, between material and image and between technology and image production. In related research Lehmann explores iconoclasm as a secular, creative act by examining its historical, political, and semiological domains in relation to 'image transformation'.

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