Del Kathryn Barton plumbs the depths of womanhood and all the painstaking, glittering, and strange truths therein

By Juliet Helmke

Fire laid waste not only to Del Kathryn Barton’s first exhibition, but also to her childhood home when her parents’ old farmhouse, located in a rural area outside of Sydney, went up in flames—with all of her work for the show stored inside. To any other artist, this might have been taken as a sign, especially given that Barton had retreated to her parents’ property after a physical breakdown and a crisis in confidence while in her final year at art school. “I had kind of lost faith as to whether I really could pursue art as my career,” she tells me one early morning, skipping from her studio, a former ice cream factory in Sydney’s inner-eastern suburbs (“We’re in an old freezer so the walls are super thick”).

“It’s no criticism of the art school itself,” she says of her alma mater, the College of Fine Arts at the University of New South Wales, but at the time she attended, in the early 1990s, it was particularly conceptual in focus. Barton’s work—painstakingly crafted paintings, most often of angular, ethereal women executed in a brilliant array of colors with dots and repetitive patterns and lines, and equally labor-intensive drawings with a similar attention to decorative minutiae—was considered somewhat traditional in its emphasis on the handmade and its basis in a studio-centered practice. “I found art school really tough,” she remembers, “and I was eventually diagnosed with chronic fatigue. So I went back to the country.” There, after some recuperation, her attention to making a new body of work became obsessive, and she fabricated the series of drawings that was never to be shown. But the symbolism...
that Burton took from this hardship was not what many in her position would have concluded. “I felt I was being thrust back out into the world,” she says—into a life of art making.

The Australian art landscape would scarcely be what it is today without Barton’s influence. She won the Archibald Prize—the country’s most prestigious and, often, front-page headline-making award for portraiture—twice, and the first time she received it, in 2008, was with a nine-foot-high canvas featuring her own likeness, cradling her young son and daughter in between her open legs. Bursts resolutely out of devotion to her newfound role as a mother, she titled the image You are what is most beautiful about me. Of the few women who had taken the prize before her (only eight in the award’s 96-year history), even fewer had depicted members of their own gender. To say Burton’s subject matter in this traditionally-rooted, somewhat staid competition—which has more than once been won with a painting of the country’s Prime Minister—was a break from the norm would be an understatement.

Later that year she made headlines...
again, but this time in a public favor when conservative corners of the country, and the media, objected to a sexually explicit body of work that was included in the group exhibition “Optimism” at Brisbane’s state-funded Gallery of Modern Art. The exhibition’s premise was to look at the human ways of expressing “hope, energy, passion, and playfulness.” The series, I am flesh again, featured male and female genitalia, as well as other delicately drawn body parts like eyes, hands, and hearts, along with abstract organic shapes, and surprising juxtapositions of all of these forms. It was labeled obscene. “All of a sudden I’d ended up on the front page of the newspaper for X-rated art and was being called ‘morally unfit to be a mother,’” Barton says. She, along with the curator Julie Ewing (and a large portion of the public who saw and championed her contribution), was shocked at the reaction. The works were in a separate room, with a sign advising of their sexual nature. Like any graphic movie or television show, viewers had a choice to consume. With simple pencil lines and occasional splashes of watery color, the series has a shock factor, yes, but is often more perplexing—maybe even humorous at times—with Barton’s obscure amalgamations (The large pineapple balls dangling beneath an erect penis, themselves dotted with tiny vulvas, hardly seem menacing.) Yet the series as a whole also comes across as deeply sensual. It was included in the show because, as Barton recalls Ewing saying to her at the time, “How can we have a show about optimism that doesn’t have sex in it?”

Meeting the Future With Love, left, and My Fruits of Love, right, both 2008. Watercolor, gouache, charcoal on hot pressed paper, 32¼ x 24½ in. each.
Nevertheless, the controversy did not deter the creator—numbers swelled with the publicity.

The allure of It\'s a bunny again in its ability to encompass those apparent contraries: serious but also whimsical, highly sexual yet somehow innocent through its portrayal of the human body with a sense of wry-eyed curiosity. Barton will show the work again for the first time in an upcoming career retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, opening November 17, and perhaps within the context of a larger body of work it might be easier for audiences to appreciate this thread that runs throughout her oeuvre: that apparent contradictions are able to be held within the same frame.

For her first solo show in New York City, “it\’s a bunny!” opening June 1 at Albertz Benda, Barton will present 30 new paintings. In the paintings from which the exhibition title is taken, a bare-breasted young woman sporting only Elizabethan ruffles and a crown of coarse goose quill to a sitting hare. The imagery finds its roots in Barton\’s childhood, when she moved to an eccentric property from inner Sydney as a one-year-old, and her formative experiences of communing with nature. “Living on the land was fairly new for my parents, and I think they certainly underestimated the work involved—my father rebuilding the house and my mother gardening and raising animals while also maintaining a full-time teaching job.”

“Often my titles are very meaningful and considered,” she says, but in this case, it is and isn’t. “On one level it means a lot to me but on another level it\’s just sort of an irreverent, kind of playful little murmur that you whisper in your lover\’s ear.”

Within the imagery of a r bunny, there\’s a palpable sense of encounter between the rabbit and the female protagonist. They are presented to viewers in Barton\’s extremely embellished style (they do have an unashamedly decorative aesthetic); yet the woman wears a serious, contemplative face. There\’s an innocence to her, Barton says, but, at the same time, an acknowledgement of the hierarchies that can come from an innocent consciousness. “She\’s like that, this to the way young children will occasionally spew profound declarative banter out of guileless observation. And, like the other works on view at Albertz Benda, the piquant probes at this young protagonist\’s womanhood. Her bare breasts, her stance, the expression she wears—“I wanted her to be kind of vulnerable yet strong simultaneously,” Barton says. “And I do think that\’s part of women\’s power. Yes, we need to be resilient. Yes, we need to be warriors at whatever point, but we can also derive power from being consciously vulnerable in the world.”

Among all these references and backstories, one finds the compelling portrayal of any Barton work: its ability to touch on the universal and personal; the sensual and innocent; the sordid and silly, through a simple image rendered in diagrammatically patterned, insisting detail. Albertz Benda will also play host to the U.S. premiere of the artist\’s second short film—a medium Barton began experimenting with around 2012. Real Fantasies: Cate Blanchett in the main role as the human personification of a female redback spider—It is the artist\’s first foray into live action—her previous work, a visual adaptation of Oscar Wilde The Nightingale and the Rose with Geoffrey Rush and Max Winkler\’s exhibition title is taken, a bare-breasted woman—corroborates and celebrates and questions the poetica of what it means to inhabit a female body, as she does it, will probably always be a line of inquisition.