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albertz benda

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# DEL KATHRYN BARTON

R U A BUNNY?



Australian artist Del Kathryn Barton synthesizes femininity with animal-inspired mythology in a series of anthropomorphic portraits. Her first solo exhibition in the United States, “R U A Bunny?” at Albertz Benda in New York, presented 17 new paintings and photomontages, and included a short film brandishing the star power of fellow Aussie and friend, Cate Blanchett.

Barton’s foray into live-action filmmaking, *Red* (2016), opens with an epigraph that flashes across the screen in bold lettering: “Mother of otherness / Eat me.” In the same spirit of Sylvia Plath’s poem “Who,” from which the line originates, the video paints a dark but highly polished world that could easily be mistaken for an Armani ad. Only after Blanchett has cut through her tailored suit do we see her “true” form emerge: donning scarlet lipstick and clad in a form-hugging fishnet body stocking, she writhes and screams in her personification of the highly venomous Australian redback spider, which exhibits a unique form of sexual cannibalism, whereby the male willingly sacrifices himself to the female during mating. Barton mines this sadomasochistic relationship for all its worth as the arachnid-inspired Blanchett ensnares, wrestles and slays her mate. Cycling from chapters of “Death” to “Life,” and from “Mother” to “Daughter,” conception is punctuated by camera zooms into the protagonist’s fishnet-covered crotch. The sexually violent nature of this coupling predictably manifests in a Jungian trope with the offspring’s Plathian cries of “Daddy”—the only word spoken during the video’s 15-minute run.

Another line from the same poem by Plath—“These halls are full of women who think they are birds”—could aptly describe Barton’s paintings of long-legged, feathery female subjects. A cascading plumage unfurls behind the naked figure of *The Wing and Me – You Find Your Own Heart* (2017), while feathers adorn the body as a necklace and a skirt in *I Can’t Stop My Flowers* (2017), and as arm and leg cuffs in *Weird Seed* (2017). The woman in *She Is Family* (2017) wears a giant headdress of feathers that resembles an afro, while an upturned bird dangles from her earlobe like an earring. It’s unclear what race these women are, or if they’re even human. One has two eyes on the left side of her face, some of them sport odd growths shaped like ears on their necks, and all have exaggerated eyes that enhance their otherworldly appearances.

I was tempted to classify the women as “humanoid,” but that term bears a loaded history, one that was applied to Indigenous peoples by their European colonizers. Interestingly, Barton is inspired by Indigenous Australian motifs, exemplified by the patterns of tiny dots used in many of her paintings. Her signature use of color features dark earth tones mingling with bright pops of blues and greens. It should be noted, however, that Indigenous artist Richard Bell has previously accused Barton of cultural appropriation. This spat was only one episode among many that reflect the fraught relationship between non-Indigenous Australians and the colonized land they inhabit.

The jarring juxtaposition of artifice and organic forms culminates in Barton’s photo collages. The bodies of women, dressed and posed like models in a fashion spread, have been cut and pasted, while their faces have been replaced with pictures of orchids and moths’ wings. Like a lurid fascinator, a caterpillar latches onto the “head” of the human-insect hybrid in *To Speak of Anger, I Will Take Care* (2017). The resulting pastiche is simultaneously arresting yet grotesque.

Throughout “R U A Bunny?” Barton embraces the duality of her feminine subjects who are shown to be beautiful but misshapen, fierce but vulnerable. The title of the exhibition’s eponymous work, *Are You A Bunny – A Real Live Girl* (2017), transforms the study on womanhood into a kind of existential exercise about a woman’s humanity. We see the girl, resplendent in a crown of leaves taken from many trees, holding the cute-sounding animal in question. But just as that pretense of innocence belies ferociousness, hinted at by the rabbit’s sharp claws—perhaps it is poised to strike—so must we dismantle the facade of femininity.

MIMI WONG

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### Opposite page

#### GAUTAM KANSARA

*Don't Hurry, Don't Worry* (stills)

2010

Single-channel video with sound: 14 min 58 sec.

Courtesy the artist.

### This page

#### DEL KATHRYN BARTON

*To Speak of Anger, I Will Take Care*

2017

Acrylic and archival pigment

ink on rag, 198 x 140 cm.

Courtesy the artist and Albertz Benda, New York.