

Ces McCully: Online and Earthbound

When I first began to delve into the contemporary art world, circa 1980, there were two artists that were nigh impossible to avoid. They were both American, they were both female, they both utilised photography and they both addressed notions of identity, consumerism and sexuality. They were Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger.

I raise Sherman and Kruger here because in many respects Ces McCully is their direct descendant. Sherman, who utilised photographic self-portraiture, to question self-identity is relevant, I believe, because in many ways McCully's work feels almost painfully like a form of self-portraiture. McCully is by no means a figurative artist, but her haiku-style texts more often than not feature the pronoun 'I' and thus are immediately owned by the artist.

This is where McCully departs radically from Kruger. Kruger makes declarative statements in bold Futura or Helvetica overlaid on black-and-white photographs, but unlike McCully she divorces herself from her statements by using 'you', or 'your' such as "You are not yourself" or "Your body is a battleground".

There are other key differences. While Kruger's works clearly suggest self-righteous anger, McCully's are often plaintive or melancholy which, of course, makes them very much of their time. Yet another core difference is that McCully, throughout her oeuvre, is very distinctly a colourist. She delights in a kaleidoscopic palette, drawing us in utilising an ensemble of hues.

Sherman and Kruger began their careers in the early 80s which was, for most, the pre-Internet-era. McCully is very much of the all-immersive social stratosphere of the here and now. The Internet as a lynchpin would be utterly mundane if it weren't for the fact that McCully, with some subtlety, manages to evoke the startling frustrations of the on-line world, ones that at their worst, have led to suicides and threats of murder.

McCully, thankfully, has the wisdom not to slide down that oozing rabbit-hole. What she does instead is capture the source of social ills that lead to a wide variety of irritations and de-orientations. *You cannot have it all* (2020) captures the Net-induced temptation to buy, buy and buy until the credit card catches fire and explodes. *I was not programmed for this sh*t* (2020) summarises the universal frustrations of using programmes or filling out on-line forms

that seem designed deliberately for non-human functionality. *If you only knew the sh*t I clicked on* (2020) is horribly self-explanatory while *Help I'm bored again* (2020) captures that worrisome notion that the Internet can be a balm for all things for all people. Well, as McCully makes abundantly clear, as a balm it is in fact abundantly boring.

But McCully, thankfully, has a “reprieve” as she says in an artist’s statement for this body of work. Her reprieve is in what she dubs her ‘Quilt’ paintings – kind of a Zen-like screen saver technique – indeed, the antithesis of the blathering of the Net. The colours are suddenly muted, the edges softened, the mood gently chilled. Rendered essentially in earth-tones, these are decidedly meditative works which reveal an artist in perfect compositional control.

However, McCully has other forms of “reprieve.” Originally Melbourne-based, she currently lives in the south of France with her husband, in the countryside “near a beautiful old town called Albi in the Tarn region,” she says. “It’s about a 50-minute drive from Toulouse. I’d never been to this particular area before, so we really lucked-out once we discovered it was a bit of a hidden gem. The decision to move here came about due to a combination of things; life at home had been feeling quite stressful, I wasn’t getting enough time to focus on my art practice and was in search of some adventure. Plus, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to build a network with artists and galleries overseas. In the end we thought ‘heck, life’s short’ - and just did it. If I’d known a global pandemic was soon to hit, or realised just how difficult learning a new language would be, perhaps I wouldn’t have done it. But despite the challenges, I haven’t regretted it.”

Many expatriates, faced with the challenges of moving to a non-English speaking part of the world, face issues of loneliness and frustration with communication. To compensate, many are drawn to the Internet as an outlet, which, in part, explains McCully’s use of that medium as painterly subject-matter. “I definitely agree about the reliance on the net,” she says. “I was ridiculously naive about the language barrier and found myself waiting for that magical moment to hit at 6 months where I would be suddenly fluent (which was what I was promised would happen from wonderfully supportive people back home).

“I didn’t take into account that I don’t actually work alongside French speakers every day, and have since realised I don’t actually have a natural aptitude for it! So every day is a

struggle and I walk around in a strange bubble, not understanding conversations around me. It's been quite an eye-opening experience.”

Because of this, and also because of social restrictions related to the pandemic, the digital world has become McCully's primary connection to the outside world (like so many over the past year). “Maybe that's why emotions feel so high for everyone,” she notes. “Everything is so skewed online and it's easy to forget that people aren't so bad in real life. You really can see humanity at its worst when you look at comments on a Facebook post – there's just so much vitriol!”

But while social media has brought so much negativity with it, she says, she's also “very grateful for it since it's allowed me to pursue my art career, despite not following the traditional path. It's enabled me to connect with artists, collectors and galleries from all over the world.” As a result McCully has thus far exhibited in France, Denmark, the UK, Portugal, Germany and Taiwan, as well as Australia, and take her career into her own hands, “which is something that feels more natural to me.”

“When I finished university, I had no connections or finances, and no idea how to support myself while pursuing art. That side of things always felt a little wishy-washy during studies. And so I threw myself into volunteer positions and sent loads of cringe-worthy emails over the years to get myself into roles within creative fields, trying to find something interesting enough to fulfil me while being able to support myself - an embarrassing number of career changes, really... And I've come full circle. Sometimes I think it would have been nice to have jumped straight into my art practice after uni, but then I wouldn't have gathered the life experience that I have now, and I'd be creating completely different work.”

And indeed, Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger were amongst her inspirations as she began studying art. However now Ces McCully is forging her own visual language in the south of France.

–*Ashley Crawford*