

Patricia Casey

'Inner Worlds'

INTRODUCTION

To say that Patricia Casey's images are complex is to do more than describe their intricate technique. The ideas and emotions that they channel and evoke are woven of light and dark threads; the golden and the base; the transcendental and the earthy.

Setting her image world in the realm of dreams, Patricia Casey draws on the many, often conflicting, conceptions of the nature and function of our nocturnal imaginings. From neurologist Sigmund Freud's sexualised interpretations and psychologist Carl Jung's notion of the archetype to more ancient beliefs that dreaming is a conversation with dead ancestors, dreams have been the subject of much study; study which has, as yet, yielded no firm understanding. Today, neurophysiologists and philosophers of the mind still struggle to comprehend what we all perceive so powerfully as we sleep.

Patricia Casey's works are more than simply aesthetically pleasing images depicting an intriguing but ultimately unknowable psychological space. Each is punctured and threaded as the artist's needle draws her embroidery silks in and out of the surface of the photograph. It is a disturbing act that ripples through the imagination. In feminist analysis, passing a needle and thread through the pristine emulsion of a photographic print represents the hermetic (phallic) male surface transgressed by an art form that (male) history has relegated to domestic craft because it is primarily associated with women. In the language of the French theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes, it is – quite literally – the 'punctum': the unexpected personal connection that 'pierces the viewer'. 'Punctum' is a term Barthes borrowed from medical science where one of its many meanings describes the tiny openings at the edge of the eyelid through which our tears drain; tears that keep our corneas moist and our vision sharp.

Images, however, always confound theory. We might approach an understanding through language, analysis and philosophy, but an image is always more than the sum of such linguistic parts. Just as the world of dreams, while perceivable to the wakeful mind, remains intellectually ungraspable, so the image is, ultimately, unspeakable. It is within this silent visual space that Patricia Casey constructs her dream world.

Patricia Casey has been a practicing artist since 1999. She has received a number of awards and her work has been exhibited throughout Australia and also internationally in China, France, Korea, Malaysia and America. An exhibition including her work has recently been showing in Sheffield, England and opens this month in the USA. Next month a survey of her embroidered photographic works will feature in the Head On Photography Festival in Sydney.

INTERVIEW WITH PATRICIA CASEY

[1,548 words]

Alasdair: *Embroidering onto photographic prints is a very unusual way of working. How did you start?*

Patricia: It just seemed like a very natural progression. Photography is a medium that does not allow for the 'artist's hand' to be directly evident in the finished work. I love drawing and embroidery because they are both direct physical actions. I started to print photographs on materials such as georgette or watercolour paper – more recently on heavy cotton drill – and embroider them with cotton or metallic threads.

For me, embroidering is a meditative process. During a difficult time when my father was dying, I would embroider photographs while sitting with him in hospital. The repetitive action of stitching was comforting ... and the results were a revelation!

Alasdair: *How much of what you draw on in your imagery is autobiographical and how much is from 'outside'?*

Patricia: Like most artists, my work is always in some way about me! I think it relates directly to my childhood. It's a time when you are discovering yourself as an individual separate and distinct from your family, but while still having the luxury of allowing your imagination to roam. I have a clear memory of being a young child and crouching in a neighbour's garden picking violets. I remember becoming immersed in that tiny landscape and daydreaming. Today, my main areas of interest are memory, imagination, dreams and the unconscious. My work is about remembering, forgetting, secret worlds and private spaces.

Alasdair: *Who are the people in the pictures?*

Patricia: My children and their friends. We have a fairly constant stream of young people through our home and they are all happy to pose. Generally, I shoot in ambient light in my home or in a park or garden setting. I shot one series in my kitchen because the white surfaces are easy to eliminate in Photoshop. On a few occasions I have approached interesting-looking strangers and luckily they have agreed to be photographed. In these cases, I usually just shoot against the nearest plain wall or a tree.

I shot my latest series, *'Little Secrets'*, outside, though I rarely use the original landscape. Instead I transplant the subject somewhere else. However, I have found the 'body language' in these natural settings is a little different from those made indoors. The poses are a little less static and the figures relate more directly with the landscapes into which I later 'insert' them.

Alasdair: *Do you work from a pre-visualised plan?*

Patricia: During my research period I will sketch out a composition. It is just a stepping off point; the end result is often quite different. I also collect landscape imagery during field trips here in Australia and when travelling overseas. A recent trip covered 3,000 kilometres in a six-day shoot in Western Australia. Other backgrounds have been made in Hawaii, mainland America and Korea.

I then combine the images of young people with the landscapes in the computer to create imaginary scenes. Some images involve 15 or 20 layers as I add to the composition. I will often desaturate my images and recolour them by painting in Photoshop. I then make a number of test prints to see how the image is working on the fabric. These I pin up in the studio for a week or two before I begin the embroidery stage. I let the image 'tell me' which segments to stitch and which style of stitch to use.

Alasdair: Do you make editions of your work?

Patricia: I reproduce the photographic composite in editions of five. However, while I follow a stitching plan for each image, an exact copy is not possible, which means that each embroidered print is essentially unique. People like this as they feel that their version is special to them.

Alasdair: Your work is very beautiful, but also has a hint of a darker side. Is this intentional?

Patricia: The combination of beauty and unease is intentional. While I am a fairly optimistic person I do have the 'melancholia gene' and a love of the dark side. I am conscious that, even during my happiest moments that the feeling won't last forever – it will pass. Something can go wrong. Dark and light exist together and that is just part of the human condition. While this can make me fearful at times, I also find it seductive. My images are open ended questions about what is, has been and will be next.

Alasdair: Can you give an example of that ambiguity in real life?

Patricia: In the period when my father was dying of cancer there were a lot of family stories being remembered and retold. I was very interested in the way that each person's version of a story differed. Meanwhile, like most families, photography was also a way in which we had documented our lives together. I was intrigued by the slippage that existed between the photographic image and the way the stories reflected different versions of the 'truth'.

At the time, I was researching for a Masters of Visual Art. My thesis was titled '*Echolalia and the Family Narrative*' and looked at the impulse to repeat the family story not only in terms of the narrative itself, but also in terms of more abstract pattern and repetition. 'Echolalia' is a medical term that describes the involuntary impulse to repeat another person's utterances and my thesis looked at this in terms of the visual arts.

Alasdair: What did you learn from this period of academic research?

Patricia: I looked at the ideas of a variety of philosophers, thinkers and artists. In particular, I revisited [the French theorist] Roland Barthes' writings on photography and its meaning for us in our lives. In particular, I was interested in his theories of the photograph's 'studium' [the intended subject and meaning of the image] and the 'punctum' [the element that engages the viewer on a purely personal level and which changes from one viewer to the next]. Barthes talks about the 'punctum' of an image as being the pictorial element that shoots from the image and pierces the viewer's heart.

The term 'punctum' usually describes something in the photographic image itself. In piercing the 'sacred' photographic surface with my needle and thread, the 'punctum' shifts from the photographic to the embroidered segments of my images. I am always questioning the veracity of photography. By using embroidery I can open up a triangular dialogue between the stitching (which I consider to be a form of drawing), the photographic imagery and the viewer. I am particularly interested in the struggle between absence and presence that exists in a photograph, because my images are very open ended with a similar tension between beauty and unease.

I also looked at the post-modernist Jean Baudrillard and his theories of the 'simulacrum' [a simulation that has no origin in reality, but which creates an illusion of its own reality, a 'hyperreality']. My works are simulations of places and events that do not exist or have never taken place. But even with a 'documentary' photograph one is never able to access the truth or the 'real' as there is too much slippage in meaning in terms of hindsight and personal perspective.

Alasdair: *You run workshops that combine traditional 'female' art practices with contemporary digital media. What sort of things do you teach?*

Patricia: The workshops are very enjoyable and while not restricted to women, my students are predominantly female. The most important thing I tell my students is that there are no rules – they are free to stitch in any way they choose. It does not have to be neat or traditional – they should consider it as a drawing tool. I do however demonstrate a range of traditional embroidery stitches and give guidance as to composition and technique. The workshops are proving to be very popular and the students tell me that the classes open new horizons for them in their art making. I have also taught groups of senior teachers of visual art who are looking for ideas to share with their high-school students.

Alasdair: *You showed at the Korean International Art Fair (KIAF) in 2011. What was that like?*

Patricia: KIAF was my first overseas art fair and it was fantastic! I discovered just how dynamic the Asian art world is. I learnt so much. I had not been aware of the range of art making in Asia and I found this incredibly exciting. The aesthetic is sophisticated and so fresh.

Alasdair: *What's on the horizon?*

Patricia: I am currently developing a new series with the working title 'Little Secrets'. This series is a continuation of my interest in dreams, imagination and memory, but relates more directly to the

secret self; our private interior life that we do not usually reveal to others. Even in our most intimate relationships there is always a kernel of inner self that we keep secret. In these images individuals, veiled by elements of the natural world, are caught in moments of reverie.

Alasdair: What lessons have you learned while developing your work?

Patricia: I have come to understand how the elasticity of memory can influence and enhance the present. And I have learnt to listen to my 'inner voice', as it is usually right. Intuition is a powerful thing.

You can see more of the work of Patricia Casey on her website: www.patriciacasey.com.au

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