



NATALIE KING

FATAL ATTRACTION

ARTIST JANE BURTON

“...IMAGES OF DEATH AND DESIRE EMBODIED BY THE FEMME FATALE ARE INTOXICATING IN THEIR ‘PERFECTION.’ THEY POSSESS AN IRRESISTIBLE ALLURE: HYPNOTIC, EROTIC AND POSSIBLY DEADLY. THESE IMAGES POWERFULLY CONVEY THAT IF THE PRICE TO PAY FOR SUCH A DESIRE AND ITS POSSESSION IS ULTIMATELY DEATH, THEN IT’S A PRICE WORTH PAYING.” **JANE BURTON, *TRACE ELEMENTS*¹**



FACING PAGE
Badlands 12, 2001
 Type-C print
 110 x 110cm

ABOVE
Cul-de-Sac #6, 2000
 Type-C print
 120 x 120cm

In 2005, Joe Korp committed suicide on the day his wife, Maria, was buried. Previously, Tania Herman, who was having an affair with Korp, choked Maria in her suburban garage. Four days later she was found in the boot of her car at the Shrine of Remembrance in a vegetative state. In the months leading up to the attack, Maria had felt unsafe, was warned by a clairvoyant of danger, and had changed the locks on her home. This bizarre tale of suspicious plotting is the inspiration for Jane Burton's photographic series *I did it for you* (2005). The idea of parallel lives, isolation, ennui and terror are played out across a suite of nocturnal images.

"I've always been obsessed with houses and what goes on inside them."

Reminiscent of film noir crime fiction, Burton apprehends the sordid scenes that transpire behind closed doors. A luminous woman in a trance-like state inhabits the foreground of a suburban street. In another frame, she appears gesticulating ominously behind a lace curtain. A seedy motel exterior and a man bathing under a shower faucet complete this gruesome tale of lust and betrayal. Isolated houses (*Badlands*), shacks (*Motherland* 3), abandoned interiors (*The Sweetest Path*) and figures inside looking out (*Available Light* 9) are recurrent motifs in Burton's oeuvre. Dilapidated houses return us to Edgar Allan Poe's melancholy and insufferable gloom in *The Fall of the House of Usher*; a volume of Poe's collected tales was given to her by her father in 1983. Macabre and



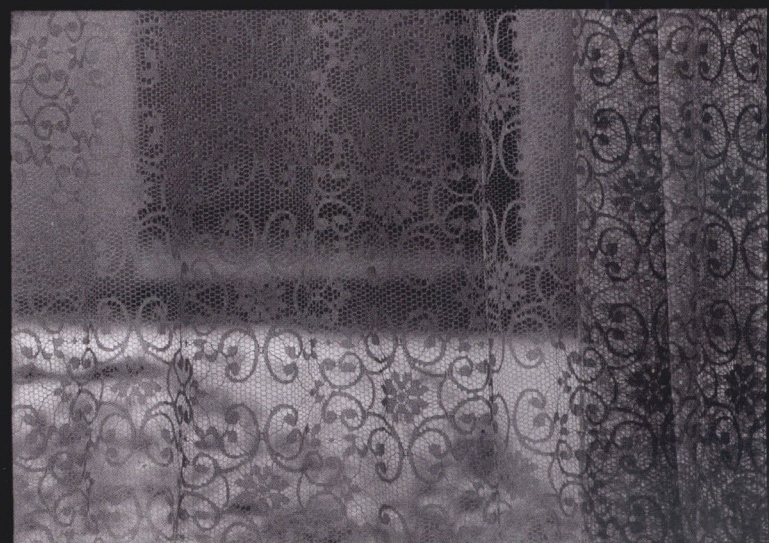
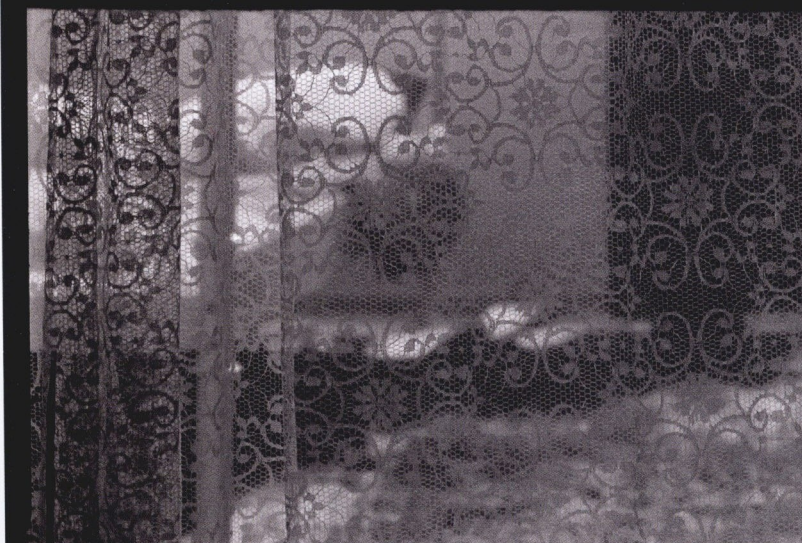
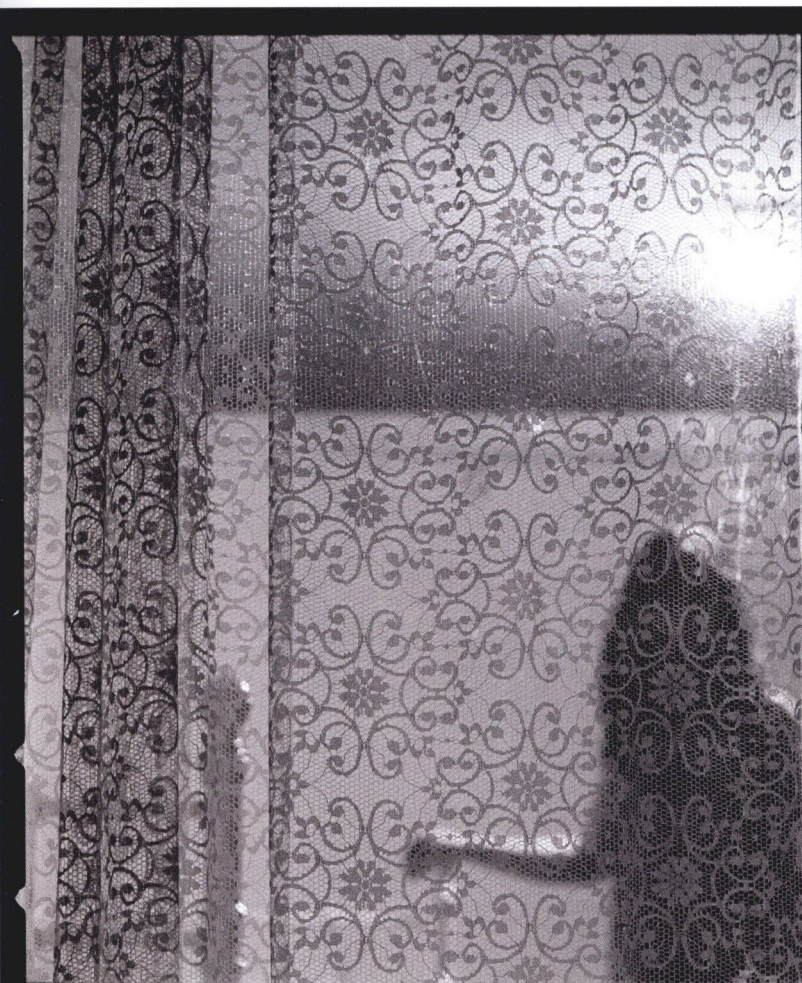
mysterious, Poe's nightmarish images of death, corruption of the flesh and insanity are analogous to Burton's visual renditions of obsessive and neurotic terror, often staged in anonymous abodes:

"I looked upon the scene before me - upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain - upon the bleak walls - upon the vacant eye-like windows - upon a few rand sedges - and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees - with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium - the bitter lapse into every-day life - the hideous dropping off of the veil... What was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher?"²

With forensic precision, Burton flexes the camera's hold on her female subjects. Often positioned at the centre of the photographic frame, her doleful, sexy and preoccupied women explore femininity as an array of surfaces and artifices that heighten our notion of the beautiful. Burton's staged *mis-en-scène* produces intricate fictions, diverse selves and fantastical dramas. Through careful arrangement of figure, costumes,

props, interiors and landscapes, the narrative implications are ambiguous yet Burton makes us acutely aware of looking whilst imbuing her images with a moody intensity. She skillfully amplifies our gaze across naked silhouettes and exposed flesh in intimate scenarios. These ambivalent worlds are charged and potent, yet typically the female faces are shrouded in darkness or obscured from view. By masking and dislodging identity, Burton hints at internal preoccupations with sexuality and desire. Perhaps the masquerade of femininity is an unconscious defense against sexual anxieties or ruminating fantasies.

Burton's vast opus was the subject of a survey exhibition at Glen Eira City Council Gallery, curated by Diane Soumilas. Spanning 20 years of her immense practice, *Jane Burton - Eye of the Beholder*, features more than 70 photographs drawn from public and private collections as well as the artist's own holding. Concurrently, Burton was exhibiting a suite of new photographs - *Ivy* - at Karen Woodbury Gallery. Both exhibitions attest to Burton's ongoing commitment to a corporeal aesthetic that is urgent and feverish. Adrian Martin comments on the inventive capacity of female



WITH FORENSIC PRECISION, BURTON FLEXES THE CAMERA'S HOLD ON HER FEMALE SUBJECTS. OFTEN POSITIONED AT THE CENTRE OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC FRAME, HER DOLEFUL, SEXY AND PREOCCUPIED WOMEN EXPLORE FEMININITY AS AN ARRAY OF SURFACES AND ARTIFICES THAT HEIGHTEN OUR NOTION OF THE BEAUTIFUL. BURTON'S STAGED MIS-EN-SCÈNE PRODUCES INTRICATE FICTIONS, DIVERSE SELVES AND FANTASTICAL DRAMAS. THROUGH CAREFUL ARRANGEMENT OF FIGURE, COSTUMES, PROPS, INTERIORS AND LANDSCAPES, THE NARRATIVE IMPLICATIONS ARE AMBIGUOUS YET BURTON MAKES US ACUTELY AWARE OF LOOKING WHILST IMBUING HER IMAGES WITH A MOODY INTENSITY.

FACING PAGE
I did it for you #2, 2005
Type-C print
112 x 112cm

ABOVE
I did it for you #5, 2005
Type-C print
112 x 112cm

artists to “...display the twisted somatisation of life... Twisting themselves into agonised poses for their own camera, even when using alter egos or models.”³ For Burton, “the body is a threshold between interior and exterior psychological worlds.” Other influences include Symbolist Art, daguerreotype portraiture, Surrealist and French erotic photography.

Often Burton works with the same models, friends and her sisters (Zoe and Miranda) to ensure a rapport and relaxed state: “I aim for an every woman not a woman of extremes.” These surrogates for herself are of a similar age, especially the crouching girl with a truncated body in *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (*Two or three things I know about her*) (1994-5). Photographed in an abandoned house, this title refers to Jean-Luc Godard’s 1967 film about a bourgeois housewife and mother who is also a call girl. In doing so, Burton alludes to the suffocating yet safe aspects of domesticity and its forbidden counterpart. Slender and pale with small breasts, dark hair offers a pictorial void and a contrast with icy skin tones. Burton’s mistresses: “stand-in for me as a way to work through things – role playing, fantasy, psychological realms, sexuality, history, dreams.” These quasi self-portraits are conceptualised in a notebook that Burton has had for 20 years full of jottings, phrases, key words and recurring ideas.

In Whitney Chadwick’s seminal essay and exhibition of self-portraits by women artists – *How do I look?* – “...the women in these representations confront us directly: whimsical, earnest, studious, enigmatic, flamboyant, shy, visionary. Beauty and identity, two of art history’s most difficult and unstable categories, are summoned forth across a dazzling range of costumes, gestures, looks, poses, materials and presentations.”⁴ Similarly, Burton’s repertoire of female characters, monumental landscapes and tawdry interiors are composed with an unnerving beauty in mind. She deploys drapery, lace, pale flesh, wigs and strong tonality to lure us into the subject’s interior life and give form to a psychological frisson. Whether the cavernous, splayed sea in *Cul-de-Sac 6* (2000) or a contorted, naked figure in *Badlands 12* (2001) lying in repose, there is a traumatic uncanniness at play.

Burton’s survey exhibition emphasises a continuum and persistent imagery evident in the earliest *Untitled* series of small black and white

photographs produced as a student at Tasmanian School of Art in Hobart, just after her mother died. There is a sense of lament and mourning with images of graves inscribed with indiscernible writing and a forlorn, lace nightgown “suggestive of sleep, madness, innocence, eroticism and vampires.” At the time, Burton frequented the majestic Cornelian Bay Cemetery in Hobart where the land juts into the river. Moreover, there is an affinity with the photographs of Burton’s teacher, Anne MacDonald, who also depicts funereal and deathly images. From the outset, Burton has portrayed images redolent with yearning, fear, forgotten eras and other worldliness. She continues to deploy out of time costumes and props sourced from Opportunity Shops as well as her own underwear and lace garments.

The eldest of eight children, Burton spent her early childhood on the outskirts of Brisbane in an historic house with “paddocks, dams, undulating hills, hibiscus and snakes in the garden. Then we moved to a farm in rural Victoria. My father commuted. He was a scientist with the Antarctic Division while my mother was a part-time social worker who later studied music at the conservatorium. We were isolated on the farm and went on big adventures, playing games with props and dolls.” As a teenager, Burton moved to Tasmania where she commenced art school in 1985. Under the tutelage of David Stephenson, Burton devoured the influence of American photographers such as Emmet Gowin and his mentor Harry Callahan [1912-1999], Garry Winogrand [1928-1984] and the Mexican photographer, Manuel Alvarez Bravo [1902-2002]. Concurrently, she was absorbing “the beautiful but gloomy Tasmanian atmosphere, landscape, lighting, history and clouds.” She has exhibited alongside other Tasmanians including Pat Brassington, Jane Eisenmann and David McDowell.

Across Burton’s oeuvre, there is a pervasive influence of cinema evident in her approach to collecting locations, costumes and narratives as well as cinematic seriality. Psychological crime thrillers – *Blue Velvet* and *Silence of the Lambs* – resonate with their “dank, heavy, unhealthy palette and claustrophobic atmosphere.” With an ongoing interest in trauma and sexual moments, Burton often depicts a lone woman, yet there is a sense that someone might be lurking outside

...BURTON'S REPERTOIRE OF FEMALE CHARACTERS, MONUMENTAL LANDSCAPES AND TAWDRY INTERIORS ARE COMPOSED WITH AN UNNERVING BEAUTY IN MIND. SHE DEPLOYS DRAPERY, LACE, PALE FLESH, WIGS AND STRONG TONALITY TO LURE US INTO THE SUBJECT'S INTERIOR LIFE AND GIVE FORM TO A PSYCHOLOGICAL FRISSON.



the picture frame. We are reminded of the perversely disfigured dolls constructed and photographed by the Surrealist Hans Bellmer in the 1930s. Bellmer’s “compulsive repetitions of erotic and traumatic scenes, difficult intricacies of sadism and masochism, of desire, defusion, and death”⁵ continually restage primal fantasies and traumatic events. In the text that introduces the first doll in *Die Puppe* (1934), Bellmer writes about seduction, and his photographs often present *poupées* in scenes evocative of sex and death.

Seduction and stalking pervade the atmosphere of tension and sexual longing in Burton’s *Parking Stations* (1998). Standing under a brazen fluorescent light, a young female accosts the viewer as she is trapped in this gloomy interior. Is this female protagonist waiting for her captor? Why has she disappeared from the second photographic frame? With narrative ambiguity, Burton depicts a sinister unease and psychosexual drama. Burton’s use of natural light shifts according to subject and mood, from black and white to searing daylight and the brooding ambiance of dusk. An eerie tonality, reminiscent of painting, is evident in some of her landscapes especially *The Other Side* and *Motherland*.

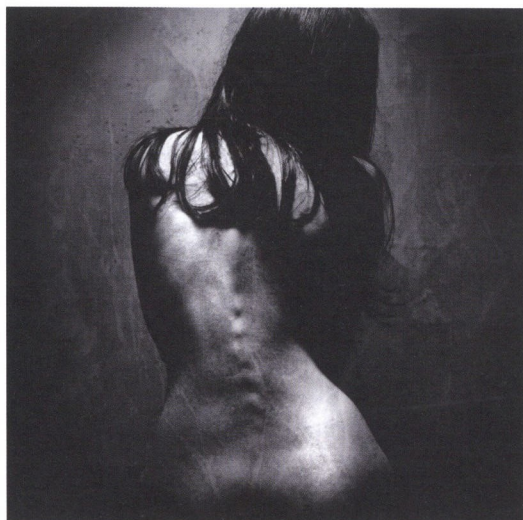
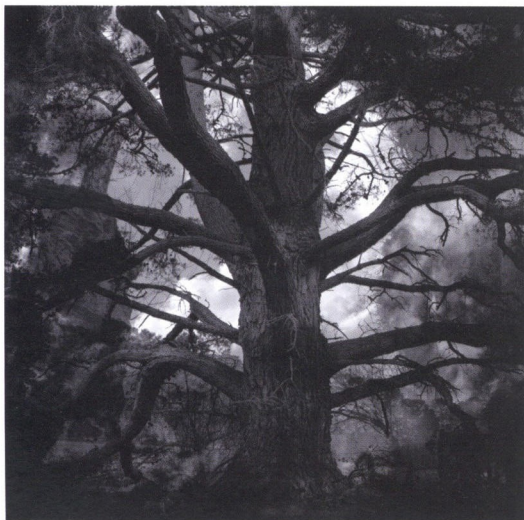
In 2005, Burton undertook an Australia Council residency in London where the series, *Wormwood*, was conceived:

“I was there during the winter, alone... I became more interested in the bare winter trees that surrounded the buildings. This was in part due to the bleakness of the estates in the bitter cold, and the fact that I was alone and worried about my personal safety.... For me *Wormwood* has fairytale associations; a place deep in the woods where magical and strange things



The Other Side, 2002 - 3
Type-C print
110 x 110cm

*Deux ou trois choses
que je sais d'elle (Two
or three things I know
about her)*, 1994 - 5
Type-C print
25 x 20cm



ABOVE
Wormwood #3, 2007
Type-C print
110 x 110cm

FAR LEFT
Wormwood #8, 2007
Type-C print
110 x 110cm

LEFT
Wormwood #4, 2007
Type-C print
110 x 110cm

FACING PAGE
Parking Stations, 1998
Type-C print
110 x 110cm



may happen. *Wormwood* suggests the dank and decay of the forest, of animals, of enchantment, of transformation, of fear, desire, secrets.”⁶

Wormwood marks the first occasion that Burton overlaid negatives in her digital darkroom. These composite negatives meld genres, fusing female figure with the landscape: women appear as if devoured by dark branches against bare flesh. *Wormwood* refers to the infamous ingredient in absinthe that causes hallucinogenic intoxication:

“It depicts a place existing in the dark hours; in the deep recesses of the subconscious; in a state of loneliness, violence, narcotic intoxication, hallucination, and uncontrolled fantasy.”⁷

The mirror, window, doorway or aperture is a recurrent motif in Burton’s timorous fictions. Suggestive of portals and thresholds, the mirror is also a device for self-analysis and revelation. Here, Burton lures us into the tremulous, urgent world of repressed fears and intoxicating fantasies.

<NOTES>

Unless otherwise attributed, all quotes are from conversation with the artist, September 2009.

1. Jane Burton interviewed by Bec Dean, *Trace Elements: spirit and memory in Japanese and Australian photomedia*, Tokyo Opera City Cultural Foundation, Tokyo, 2008, p. 70.
2. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Edgar Allan Poe, Chatham River Press, New York, 1981, p. 199.
3. Adrian Martin, ‘Sex Neurosis’, *Dark Dreams + Fluorescent Flesh*, SASA Gallery, 2009, p. 6.
4. Whitney Chadwick, ‘How Do I Look?’, *Mirror Mirror: Self-portraits by women artists*, Watson-Guption Publications, New York, 2002, p. 8.
5. Hal Foster, ‘Fatal Attraction’ in *Compulsive Beauty*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 101.
6. Jane Burton interviewed by Brett Ballard, June 2007, http://www.rexirwin.com/artists/gallery_artists/burton/2008/interview.html
7. Artist’s Statement, *Trace Elements: spirit and memory in Japanese and Australia photomedia*, Tokyo Opera City Cultural Foundation, Tokyo, 2008, p. 65.

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