

Rapture: the art of Sonia Payes

Rapture- a mystical transformation, a state of intense exaltation and joy of mind and feeling; the materialisation of an epiphany from belief into existence, the resurrection of souls given a new existence.

The illusive rapture contained within the images of Sonia Payes's photographs, sculptures and videos, arrests that moment of inspiration and the excitement of that special moment of insight experienced by the artist, while extending this elation away from a personal framework into a wider context that gives the images a sense of artistic veneration.

The solo exhibition *Parallel Futures* revolves around the theme of regeneration and rebirth; with a subtext of fire and ice, representing the environmental extremes that pose the potential for death and destruction. A humanizing focus within the theme of regeneration is Payes's recurring focus on a portrait image of her daughter, Ilana - an iconic element that in certain works morphs into a four-faced goddess, or in others, becomes a hybrid automaton of the future. This image thus reiterates that history, within the inevitable cycle of birth and death, begins with the individual and that both the past and present contain the future.

The symbolic theme of fire and ice that echoes through Payes's work is redolent with numerous allegorical, biblical and poetic associations. In Greek mythology Hephaestus was the god of fire and from this came metalworking and the art of sculpture; while in Indian cosmology, Brahma the Hindu four-faced god of creation, oversaw future civilization emerging from fire and destruction; and in *The Inferno*, the first book of Dante Alighieri's epic poem *The Divine Comedy* (c 1308-20), Satan is trapped, not in a fiery hell, but waist deep in the lake of his frozen tears of regret. Symbolically fire and ice have thus long been associated with concepts of destruction and regeneration. As Robert Frost mused in his 1920 poem, *Fire and Ice*,

*Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.*

Sonia Payes's interest in photography began when as a young student in Melbourne she was an enthusiastic browser of second-hand bookshops and collected a wide range of books on photography. Of particular importance in nurturing her interest was Roman Vishniac's, *A Vanished World* (Noonday Press, NYC, 1983) and André Kertész's, *A lifetime of Perception*, (Jane Corkin, Andalusian Books, NY 1982).

Vishniac (1897-1990) was a Russian-American photographer best known for his black and white images of Jewish culture and life in Central and Eastern Europe before the

Holocaust. In particular his documentary photographs taken in 1930-34 of the *shtetlech* - small towns with large Jewish populations that then existed, reinforced Payes's sense of her own family and cultural traditions; with her father who was born in Jaroslaw in south-eastern Poland on the border with Ukraine, being a Holocaust survivor who had come to Australia as part of post-war immigration.

While Vishniac's photographs reverberated with Payes because of their poignancy and relevance as social documents, it was the experimental approach of André Kertész (1894-1985) that became a major formative influence in her development as an artist. His photography, using the new and small 35mm Leica camera, had moved from photo-journalism to a style of photographic symbolism, where he focused on unexpected detail; the surrealistic quality heightening the impact of the image. His example of focusing on abstract detail almost to the point of ambiguity, became an integral formative element for Payes's approach to photography.

It was in the context of raising a family with her husband David Payes (with daughter Ilana born in 1982 and second daughter Janine in 1984), that Sonia Payes acquired her first camera to document her children and the decisive personal moments of her life. Initially, she attended a 6-week photographic course at the Council of Adult Education in 1987, before enrolling in a one-year part-time course on black/white photography and printing at the Melbourne School of Art and Photography, Elsternwick, under the tutelage of John Stevenson. As a lecturer with a reverence for traditional photography he also introduced Payes to the possibilities of experimentation in both shooting and printing. This included the use of *rayographs* (a picture produced without a camera by arranging objects on light-sensitive paper, a process initially popularized by the Surrealist artist Man Ray (1890-1976)); and the use of multiple negatives sandwiched between glass, which allowed Payes to experiment with overlays of disparate images such as nude figures and plant leaves. During this time she also mastered the details of analogue film printing and exposure, as well as acquiring an ongoing enthusiasm for experimentation and a desire to extend the boundaries of her art practice.

To further her expertise, Sonia Payes attended the Melbourne School of Art and Photography for another year learning the techniques of analogue color printing and then the Australian College of Photography, Art and Communications (ACPAC), in Oliver Lane, Melbourne, also part-time, from 1987-91. She then successfully established a studio as a professional portrait and commercial photographer, gaining numerous awards as a member of the Australian Institute of Professional Photography from 1995, and awarded Master Photographer status in 2001.

During this time her focus was on portraiture and capturing the 'decisive moment' within a set studio context. She admired the highly crafted photography of George Platt Lynes (1907-55), who was the chief photographer for *Vogue* studios in the mid-1940s. He also created a substantial oeuvre of erotic images of male torsos captured in absolute detail with the muscular contours of the figure framed by dramatic back lighting. In this respect the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-89) with their provocative power and, as with George Platt's work, his use of tonal compression for emphasis on detail, became a direct influence on Payes's pursuit of this in her own photography.

From the 1990s onwards Sonia and David Payes frequently travelled to a wide variety of locations such as India, Morocco, and Papua New Guinea where she experimented with underwater photography, and to Central Australia, where she produced a series of semi-abstract images of Uluru, which were acquired by the Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory, Darwin. The Payes' future trips later involved seeking out and trekking to extreme environments, such as the volcanoes near Lake Taupo in New Zealand, to glacial and high altitude ice terrains and the wind-swept lakes in Chile's Patagonia region; all of which provided inspiration for Sonia Payes's photographic work.

During this time she also continued to work in the studio and a group of her experimental black/white images, was included in the *Art in Public Spaces* program directed by Susan McCulloch, in the shop-front galleries of the old City Square and at the Melbourne Town Hall. Then in 2003 she had her first solo exhibition *Body of Work* at the John Buckley Gallery, Melbourne. Inspired by her admiration for Mapplethorpe and his finely articulated images of the muscular body, her subject was an Afro-American body builder who was her local gym instructor. The dark photographs in this series emphasised the muscular contours of his back, 'It was like a black landscape' Payes observed. However, visible at the edge of this 'landscape' as a dramatic highlight, was the face of her young daughter Ilana, her eye appearing like a dot surrounded by the glossy black of the composition. Ilana's face from thereon, was to be a constant feature in Payes's work. The culmination of her interest in portraiture however, was the publication of a three-year photographic essay, *UNTITLED. Sonia Payes/ Portraits of Australian Artists*, published by Macmillan in 2007, on 60 Australian artists in their studio and surrounding context.

While taking a break from the *UNTITLED* book project in 2006 Payes visited Japan, where she saw the video installations of Bill Viola, in his first retrospective in Asia, *Hatsu-Yume: first dream 2006* at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo. The luminous quality of Viola's images, their symbolic narratives and his focus on video and multimedia works, exerted a powerful influence on Payes and re-focused her towards experimentation with new technology.

Bill Viola (b. 1951) is acknowledged as one of the great pioneers of video installations. His work with video and sound, manipulates our sense of perception, playing with symbolic Zen-inspired opposites and creating dream-like situations where figures subtly emerge and move from darkness to light. A work typical of Viola's installations, is *Crossing* 1996, in which a figure slowly approaching within a darkened room, when in full frame, is rapidly engulfed by raging flame; and after the fire subsides, the figure is gone. The sequence repeats, with the approaching figure now consumed by a falling torrent of water, again when the cascading water ends, the room is empty.

Viola's sense of playing with opposites and the ambiguity of perception appealed to Payes, but the initial question was how to capture ambiguities with still images. The solution as presented in her *Soul on Ice* series of 2010 was the use of intense saturated light with multiple transparent veils of organza to achieve dream-like liminal images. In the previous decade she had created a series of photographs taken at the Sydney Mardi Gras, in which the super-saturated colours, close variable focus and claustrophobic vistas conveyed the energy and ethos of the event. The focus for the *Soul on Ice* series was now on lyrical gentleness, and an evocative sense of psychological introspection

with Ilana's face in white geisha-like makeup and high-key exposure enhancing the ethereal quality of the gentle-pink images, which almost submerge and disappear into the monochrome ether. In the following *Mia* series 2014, which also featured the face of Mia, her niece, here appearing pale and veiled, Payes extended the ethereal dream-like quality of the *Soul on Ice* series by adding an what appears to be an apparent cascade of water, but is purely technical expertise through the camera, the strong frozen dynamic emphasising the profile of the head.

In later works, particularly a series of landscapes shot in New Zealand, Payes again used a similar device, in this case a shrouding fog to add to the potential power and ambiguity of the image. Payes has always been interested in finding and enhancing anthropomorphic qualities within ambiguous images, of apprehending human traits within impersonal elements, so that the detailed contours of the human body now became abstracted landscapes as in her earlier *Body of Work* series. Although Payes had acquired a digital camera setup in the mid 1990s, the quality of the camera images and printing fell short of her expectations and requirements, and so she preferred to continue with the use of analogue film, confident that images caught in the camera were what she wanted, and would not require any future post presentation manipulation.

Nevertheless, her interest in digital and computer generated imagery was increasing along with the improvement of the technology. In 2007 Payes participated in a group exhibition at McClelland, titled *The far side of the Moon*, in which all the works relied on self-illumination in the context of a totally darkened display space. Payes used the 2003 black torso images from the *Body of Work* series as the basis for a multi-media work, *Insomnia 1* 2007, which consisted of multiple, digital screens and monitors. The four central screen images depicted a black torso crumbling like clay, only to reform before the cycle repeated; while other adjacent screens showed images of Ilana's head slowly rotating, distorting and reforming, as her hand in an hypnotic rhythm, covered and then revealed her face. The second work *Insomnia II* 2007, consisted of an internal mirrored box reflecting to infinity two images of Ilana, eyes closed and eyes open, depending on the viewer's sight line.

These two works marked the first excursion into digital and multimedia installations, which were followed by the DVD work *Blink* 2009, a tightly framed close-up image of Ilana's slowly blinking eye. However, the image which Payes established as the ongoing visual meme for her future *Re Generation* works, was the hybrid image of Ilana's portrait, morphing with a computer-generated avatar head. In part, the pictorial source for the morphing portrait, was a series of science fiction novels and film thrillers, such as *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) directed by Steven Spielberg from an original concept developed by Stanley Kubrick in the early 1970s, and Alex Proyas's dystopian science-fiction *I, Robot* (2004) based loosely on Isaac Asimov's short-story collection of the same name. Other influential films for Payes were Neil Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009) set in South Africa where accidental extraterrestrial aliens are subject to xenophobia and Apartheid-like segregation, and Blomkamp's later dystopian futuristic *Elysium* (2013), where the luxurious habitat Elysium circulates in space above a ravaged, polluted Earth, controlling and perpetuating the extremes of overpopulation, injustice and class exploitation.

The original *A.I.* Stanley Kubrick film project had been delayed, inhibited by the lack of CGI technology (computer generated imagery) capable of creating the fictional reality, and it is interesting to note too, that when Payes wanted to create her morphing Ilana portrait for the multimedia installation *Insomnia* (2007) she had to rely on multiple sequences of 3000 still images of Ilana, taken through 360 degrees, to achieve this early morphing effect.

During the 2000s there were a number of parallel developments in Payes's work. There were landscape photographs shrouded in fog that obscured immediate topographic recognition, often with an inverted presentation of aerial imagery to push immediate recognition to subliminal limits; as seen in the exhibition *Luminous Interlude*, shown in Melbourne in 2011 and Brisbane in 2013, which included a series of aerial mountain and valley photographs turned vertical to emulate the format of a Japanese scroll. And complementing these landscapes was a series of partially tessellated images, their box-like pixelated quality playing with the three-dimensionality of the works. Payes also shaped the format of the images to increase the illusion of three-dimensionality.

The box effect featured in Payes's next multi-media work *Lumina #1812*, 2011. Using a 'Lumina' microwave oven (at that time seen as a potentially dangerous kitchen utensil) Payes concealed a LCD screen in the oven door to create an illusion of the interior in which an animation depicted a rotating tessellated cube. This cube would periodically collapse in fire to reveal a stylized computer-generated porcelain head matrix. The DVD animation of the cycle of destruction and regeneration within the oven was hypnotically fascinating and a superb counterfoil to the pixelated landscapes.

In October 2012 Payes was awarded a two-month artist residency from the Australia China Art Foundation with the Chinese sculptor Shen Shaomin (b. China 1956), known for his over-life-size futuristic skeletal animals and figures. This residency in a rural studio in Huairou, north of Beijing, offered Payes an opportunity to experience both the rural and industrial aspects of China as well as its traditional and contemporary arts.

Prior to taking up the residency she attended the opening of the 9th *Shanghai Biennale*, whose theme was 'Reactivation' that was presented in the new Power Station Art Museum. Payes was particularly impressed by the video artists associated with the allied experimental art exhibition, *Harmonious Differences*, which further consolidated her growing interest in video art. During this time, she met and visited the studio of Xu Zhongmin (b.1961), whose works of android-like figures, as animated digital projections and kinetic sculptures activated by strobe-light effects, create an illusion that they are constantly moving. These figures climbing upwards in perpetuity are a poignant illustration of human life as being a long series of circles and repetitions.

A significant aspect of Chinese art at this time was the use of enormous scale, multiplication of elements and massive logistics employed for the production and presentation of each work. This sense of scale and repetition was further reinforced when Payes visited the archeological excavation of the terracotta funerary warriors in Xian, in the Shaanxi Province, of the armies of Qin Shi Huang, the first Emperor of China (210–209 BCE). The massive scale, with over 6000 warriors having been unearthed in the first pit alone, epitomized the historical challenge apparent to contemporary Chinese artists.

During the two-month residency in the Huairou studio Payes was aware of the rapid encroachment of industrialization and the accompanying environmental degradation, particularly through the rampant quarrying for cement on the rural cornfields that surrounded the studio. In response to this industrial pollution she produced memorable photographic midday images of the sun shining through a dusty shroud of industrial haze and pollution. These works, in part echoed the fog and steam qualities of her New Zealand volcanic landscapes of 2011, while also being a prelude to the ice and geothermic steam images shot in Iceland in 2014. The theme of pollution, the symbolic conflict of fire and ice, remains a significant subtext to Payes's work, as equally does the concept of the past, reappearing in the present, and influencing the future.

In China Payes also produced a series of documentary images of bundles of corncobs in the market and streets of the local village - evidence of the disappearing sustenance of village life. Back in Melbourne these images inspired a new animation work, *Corn and Quarries* 2013. Utilizing the monochromatic head matrix form of Ilana developed for the *Lumina #1812* microwave installation, Payes with the technical assistance of David Mullins, a 3D modeller, produced an animation of a fast-flowing, hypnotic aerial journey over a dusty monochromatic landscape of swaying fields of corncob stalks that comprise the four faces of the *Regeneration* works. The animation references Payes's earlier Ilana works, while also drawing on her experiences in China, including her appreciation for the multi-faced sculptures of SE Asia, Cambodia and India.

Another significant journey for Sonia Payes was travel to the arctic regions of Iceland in 2014, which produced a new fog and ice series, which juxtaposed the extremes of jagged ice floes against the dense, unbroken, smooth swell of the dark ocean. These works drew on Payes's interest in the work of Gerhard Richter (b.1932) particularly the paintings where his photorealism images dissolve into 'blurr' paintings. These works echoed Payes's aesthetic for the fog of uncertainty, as in her *Soul on ice* series, where reality is cloaked in ambiguity and psychological projections are subjectively inherited with past experiences. Also of particular interest to Payes was the publication, *Gerhard Richter, EIS*, (verlag der buchhandlung walther könig köln, 2011) of photographs taken by Richter in 1972 off the coast of Greenland of vast open oceans, chunky ice floes and bergs. The innovative design of this book, with neither beginning nor end, sections of text and images upside down and abutting mirror images, greatly appealed to her. It was instrumental in re-enforcing Payes's interest in experimentation and pushing beyond the expected, and in terms of content, a renewed interest in Iceland as a subject for her art. An additional source of interest in Iceland and its terrains was the innovative exhibition of the Danish/Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson (b. 1967) presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in association with the Sydney Festival 2010. A sculptor and environmentalist, Eliasson uses natural elements such as light, water and fog to transform installations into immersive environments, an approach that increasingly interested Payes.

Parallel with the continuing development of her sculptural works that used the stylised matrix based on Ilana, Payes also developed a second group of photographic images related to her earlier *Ice man* series of 2010. Typified by *Red Warrior* 2014, these new works continue the anthropomorphic head projection onto random ice floes and bergs. Payes sought out and judiciously enhanced ambiguous facial features that with minimal

photo-shopping and splicing mirror images together, to emphasise the symmetry of the found faces latent in the ice.

For Payes this was another logical extension of the idea of morphing a face, from the initial human portrait to android hybrid, from the full frontal matrix to four cardinal facing heads, to the activation of facial recognition through the use of CGI video programming. Similarly, there has been an experimental progression from the initial *Insomnia* installation, through the video *Lumina* to the digital animation *Corn and Quarries* 2013. Based on a naturalistic landscape, the industrial dust and pollution covering and cloaking a field of 'corn heads' in *Corn and Quarries* has been replaced in Payes's new digital animation *Ice Landscape* 2016 with an icy chill. Symbolically within her iconography, fire has thus made way for ice. In this new work the viewer is transported, airborne across an undulating icy wilderness, and through and around a series of transparent gargantuan ice matrix heads. Metaphorically it is a journey across a dead, frozen wasteland toward signs of regeneration and rebirth. As the ice landscape slowly melts and recedes, it reveals the new Gaia goddesses, with four cardinal faces looking upon the new world.

The theme of rapture, the resurrection of the past into the present, also plays out in Payes's newest multimedia installation. Here, within a darkened display floats a massive holographic face, the god-like matrix of the Ilana image, suspended as an icon of our civilization, a symbol of both humanity and technology, of memories past and of future realities. If art is playing with the senses, to deceive the eye and to engage the mind in speculation and questioning, then Payes's most recent group of works, the *Minerva* series engages both these faculties. This series employs a lenticular printing technology that allows three images to appear to merge from one into the other then back, with only the slightest change of the viewer's line of sight. The *Minerva* heads of gold, silver and bronze (*Minerva* named after the Greek goddess of wisdom) also evolved from Payes's anthropomorphic *Ice warrior* heads; however, now the assertion of the ambiguous features is replaced by a mercurial morphing between the extremes of the two images. The series is epitomised by the philosophical view of the German scholar Georg Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831), who poetically observed, 'The owl of Minerva begins its flight only in the gathering of darkness'; that only within the impending doom of the eleventh hour will humanity with its wisdom rise to the occasion and adopt a rational approach to situations such as climate change and environmental pollution.

In a sense, Sonia Payes's world view also echoes the logic of Hegel's *dialectic*, where the way forward from the confrontation of opposites is synthesis, the creation of a new idea: from the *thesis* and *antithesis* emerges a greater truth in a new *synthesis*. The exhibition *Parallel Futures* is built upon Sonia Payes's interest in the extremes of fire and ice, and the view that the future is inhabited by the past, and in the past lies our future.

Robert Lindsay
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* Georg Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831) quoted by Egon Friedell, *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit*, vol.3, p.79, cited in Clive James, *Cultural Amnesia*, WW Norton, New York, 2007, p. 306.