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Erotic Ambiguities The Female Nude In Art By Helen McDonald

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‘Writing the body’ has been the principal concern of feminist performance artists, many of whom, such as Karen Finley, extended the project into the realm of the obscene, often invoking Bataille and his advocacy of an aesthetic based on transgression. This was not the direction taken by the playwright/director Jenny Kemp, however, whose staging of the naked female body was inspired by the surrealist paintings of Paul Delvaux, Perhaps because she came to his work from a background in theatre, Kemp saw beyond an earlier feminist claim that Delvaux’s paintings eroticise the viewing process and allow no privacy for his nudes. Kemp accepted the visual realism of the paintings, but interpreted the women as intelligent, meditative and inward looking. Delvaux’s brilliance, she believed, lay in the way that he alluded to an inner world of private thoughts by carefully measuring the psychic relationships between people, such as those in *L’Echo*, who inhabited a setting that was, in most respects, the everyday world of public interaction (Plate 51). This was in contrast with the paintings of Dali, for example, which claim to represent only the realm of the unconscious. Kemp’s play, *The Black Sequin Dress*, 1996, developed the theme of female introspection (Plate 52). It begins with a fortysomething-year-old woman, Undine, who leaves her domestic life in a council flat to go to a nightclub wearing a slinky black dress. As she nervously crosses the floor, she is gripped by a sudden urge to look backwards, but when she does so, she slips and falls. From here onwards the narrative structure, the identity, of the woman, and her anxious journey shatter into fragments, which are then deflected into myth, dream, memory and fantasy. Using devices found in Delvaux, such as doubling (the woman in her various roles is played by four different actresses) and repetition (this scene is repeated many times), Kemp was able to illuminate multiple levels of consciousness and to suggest parallel colliding currents of desire.

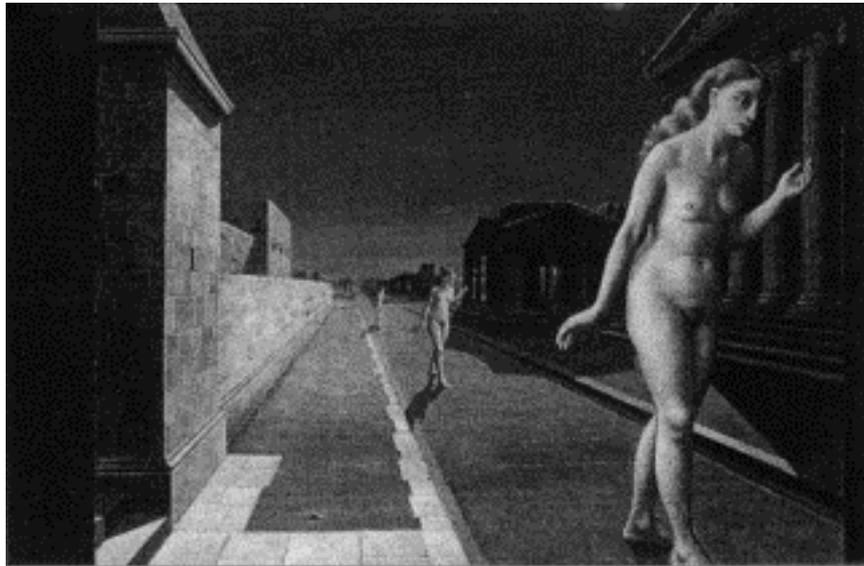


Plate 51 Paul Delvaux, *L'Echo*, 1943, oil on canvas, 105 cm x 128 cm (Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, Nagoya).



Plate 52 Jenny Kemp, *The Black Sequin Dress*, 1996, a play. Actors, from left: Natasha Herbert, Margaret Mills, Mary Sitarenos, Greg Stone, Ian Scott. Photograph by Jeff Busby.

By establishing a dialogue between Undine's inner and outer worlds, Kemp aimed to cancel out the voyeur/victim relationship which many 1980s feminists associated with the representation of the female nude. She saw no risk, therefore, in preserving stereotypes, like the nude, in order to consider them deeply, taking time to tease out lateral, psychic resonances from the woman's point of

view. Accordingly, her actresses were slim, fit and able to look good in a slinky, black dress. However, as a departure from Delvaux, they were not young, ideal beauties, and their nakedness was confronting rather than seductive. Only once does a fully nude actress appear on stage. She steps out in high heels, carrying a handbag and chanting a panic-stricken monologue as she re-enacts the first scene, recalling it in terror. To her right, a fully-dressed woman in a black sequined dress nervously applies lipstick, and, to her left, a woman in a nightdress, waking up after a bad dream, reaches for a glass of water and watches a man slip past with a skeleton. A fourth woman watches from the window of a suburban house. The woman's nakedness in this scene conveys powerfully the absolute shock of finding oneself singular and vulnerable in the external world while having to negotiate a multiplicity of anxious internal demands. Undine's nudity is the ultimate test of this social skill. She does not capitulate in any way, and by fending off terror, insists on the ownership of her body and the dignity of her actions. A later commentary on the event by a male actor externalises our perception of her, but while Undine is on stage it is her interior world which controls her body and the scene.

Like Delvaux, Kemp used nudity to problematise distinctions between private and public, but her art differed from his in that the nakedness of the woman was part of a 'performative' process rather than an illusion. Nevertheless, Kemp did not attempt to seduce or trick the gaze - the apparatus of external, sexual interest of the Other in the female body. Her strategy was rather to bracket this binary of subject and Other, in order to explain the female body/psyche itself as multiple and divided. Undine's nakedness was a symbol for the extreme effort of will that was required in preventing that conflicted, internal world from obscuring the external world completely. It was thus a strategy for preserving the distinction between fantasy and reality, rather than for breaking it down.

The artistic productions discussed so far in the current chapter would not usually be grouped together, either stylistically or thematically. Even as participants in a feminist discourse, the orientations of Burton, Moffatt, Smart and Kemp are very different. While resisting comparisons that might diminish the art's complexity, I have attempted to show how all of them have probed the uncanniness and ambivalent subject positions of certain surrealist art practices. This strategy yielded an intriguing ambiguity in their own art, and cleared the ground for a more positive reading of the female body.