

Anne Marie Grgich

Archaeologies of the Extraordinary Everyday

4 October to 13 December 2009



MILK SOAP
THE IVY 40 g - 1.4 oz
SUDANI SHUUBU EL ALPHAN SOAP
IN PAKISTAN 177 g (6.25 oz)

Anne Marie Grgich began making spontaneous art at the age of fifteen, mostly by painting surreptitiously on the inside pages of books in the family library, or making collage art with basement junk. So began the extraordinary journey with the idea of the book as transformative vehicle and a sophisticated, experimental artmaking process that is embodied in the works in this her first Australian solo exhibition.

Her journey as an artist really began, though, with a kind of physical tabula rasa caused by a car accident. 'My childhood came to an abrupt halt in 1981,' she says, 'I became a child again, losing all my wits, but retaining my child when I woke up from a coma. It's like the formative years were erased, forcing me to relearn a lot over the next ten years.' Years of turbulence followed, with intense downs, but also ups, including the birth of a son who remains the most important force in her life. These were all experiences that fed, and continue to feed into the very substance of Anne Marie Grgich's art. And they can be intuited in each work by viewers who take the time to really look.

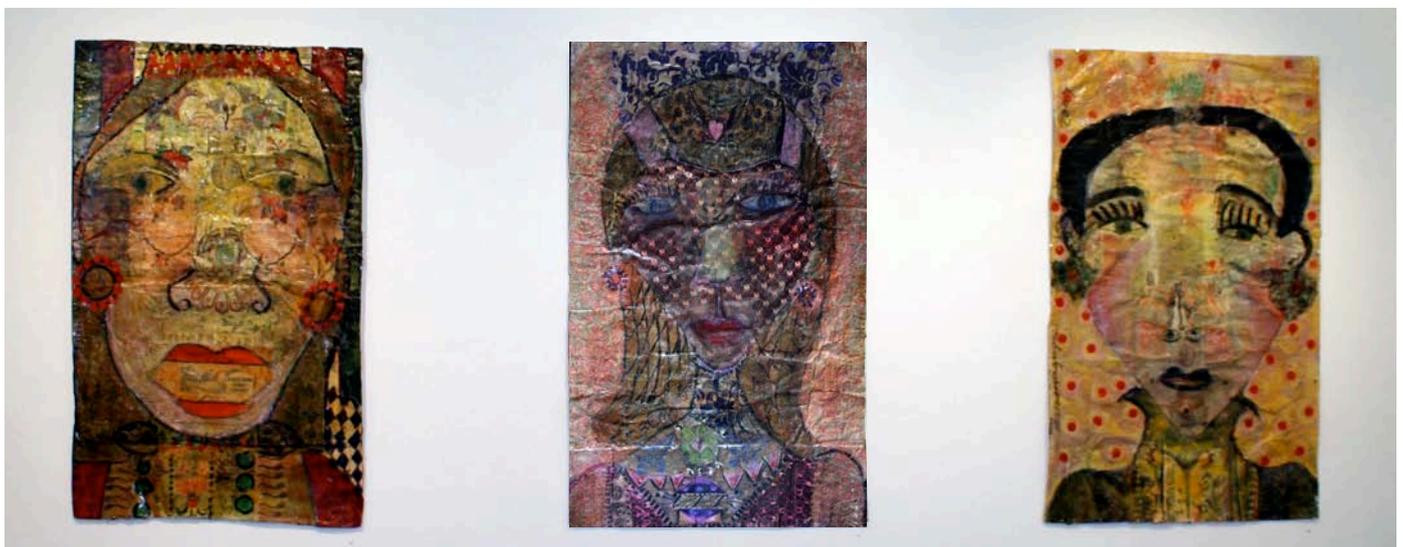
Archaeologies of the Extraordinary Everyday presents work produced in the last five years or so, much of which has been in a process of evolution throughout that time. Indeed, often works are only 'finished' when they begin that lonesome journey away from the artist's care. Broadly split into handmade books and individual wall-pieces, the works share in common, besides an intense humanity, luminescence and great physicality, resulting from a creative process that typically combines collage, painting and the use of glue and polymer resins, often thickly applied and in multiple layers. In this way, the resulting images appear simultaneously ancient and amazingly fresh and contemporary. In pieces like *Chambrun* (2008) and *Little Miss Sci Fi* (2008), for example, the icon meets the modern vernacular, embodied in visual texts that are expressly archaeological in character.

Pictorially, Grgich's images operate in an almost claustrophobically shallow space. Often a single iconic bust confronts the viewer directly, its basic form realised simply, as in three great works from 2009, *Vale's Cure*, *Florentia* or *The Chi-est-a-head*. Yet the simplicity of this overall representational superstructure is a necessary organising device for the complexity of the interdependent

units that constitute the physical object that is the work. *Florentia*, for example, is essentially pieced together from wallpaper shapes, ranging from embossed heraldic floral designs and purple flock, that predictably stands for itself as background, to dense pink-flower and black-ground paper that remarkably serves for facial skin. All of this is overlaid with paint, printed stamps, decals, collage, glue and resin that interweave subtly, creating a characteristically uncanny feel, from sensuous painted lips to blue butterfly stamps caught in the layering that culminates in the woman's eyes, and the strange third eye conjured from an ethereal print of an eighteenth-century face.

The *Chi-est-a-head*, if anything, renders the uncanny more deeply, in spite of its initially apparently lighter air. The artist utilises what has been called the Arcimboldo effect, referring to those portraits rendered from composites of fruit, vegetables or animals by the sixteenth-century Italian painter, and much loved as a device by the surrealists in the twentieth century. Thus, the tiara is a line of little paper cut-out Chinese boys and green horses, while the pattern on the woman's collar consists of two rows of schematic electrical plugs and flex. Nothing is predictable, however, and somehow inverted sumo wrestlers and two little birds make up the forehead, and a 'cooky-cutter' label provides the smile. A small, indistinct, inverted clown figure forms a rather more demonic third eye.

Anne once said, 'I live a lot. And the detritus of my pathways get funnelled into my art eventually. I'm probably working on hundreds of things at a time, but I don't have time to count. Just when I finish one thing, a ton of other things are calling my name. So much is involved in my work and where it comes from, all at once.' Her working method is resolutely intuitive, with images growing, as it were, out of the objects close at hand. In this sense, she is akin to others like Kurt Schwitters or Robert Rauschenberg who also, in their own way, commandeered and transmogrified the vernacular in their art, though without the figurative intent of Grgich. Nowhere is this clearer than in the small '*Rooster*' Book (2003), which literally threatens to burst out from the constrictions of its book-ness as a result of the density and cacophonous physicality of its pages. The book lies at the very centre of Grgich's practice,



Images: (left to right) *The Chi-est-a-head*, 2009. 72.5 x 118 cm, mixed media on fabric; *Florentia*, 2009. 72 x 117 cm, mixed media on paper; *Trista*, 2009. 68 x 118 cm, mixed media on paper.

developing out of the teenage journals she kept. It was, for a long time, the primary site of visual communication for her, and unlike most painters who come to making books from the production of discreet images, Anne's wall-pieces grew out of her books. Indeed there is often something of the manuscript sheet, or object-to-be-held about these 'paintings', as with *My Cousin is Amy Grgich* (2009) and *Scarlett's Fever and (Visions)* (2008) respectively. Significantly several of the one-offs in the exhibition are excerpts from books; that is, pages originally meant for books but which never made it, or ones that might yet become part of a book, for example, *The Land of the Lost* (2008-09), *The Turtle* (2008-09), *The Red Bird* (2007-09) and *Yellow Butterfly Transformation Lyric* (2009).

The books share in common a rugged physicality and fragility that makes handling them an intense experience. Every turn reveals a new marvel, a singular work of art in itself. Yet, reaching each page is fraught with the fear of destruction, as the object creaks, sticks and resists the inquisitive hand. Some works develop on the ground of an existing book, which might be textual, as in *Braille Book 4* (2000-04) – in this case the intensely visual collides with the necessarily tactile – or, more often in the large-scale pieces, a wallpaper sample book, as in *The Golden Arrow* (2005-07). Others, like 'Rooster' Book are made from scratch, whilst the wittily titled, 260 cm long *Fifty-two Page Moleskin Facebook* (2008-2009) is a deconstruction/reconstruction piece originating as an ordinary little pocket notebook.

The most obviously sculptural object in the exhibition, *The Opulent Goddess Book* (2003-2009), stretches the definition of book to its limits. Its ten pages of goddess portraits are an orgy of encrusted jewels and other objects, encased by two heavy wooden frames. More 'folksy', perhaps, than any of the other works in the show, it is a kind of vernacular reliquary for the life force and power of the feminine; a more obvious symbol of the élan vital that animates all of the work.

Colin Rhodes
October 2009

Select bibliography

Rose Gonnella, 'The Books of Anne Grgich', *Raw Vision* No. 22, Spring, 1998

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Tom Patterson, *Anne Grgich*. Exh. Cat. MIA Gallery, Seattle, WA, 1996

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Trunk. Volume One: Hair, Sydney: Bocalatte Pty Ltd, 2009

Betty-Carol Sellen, with Cynthia J. Johanson, *Self-Taught, Outsider and Folk Art: A Guide to American Artists, Locations and Resources*, Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2000



Images: (top to bottom) 'Rooster' Book (page spread), 2003. 14.5 x 11.2 x 6 cm, mixed media handmade book (private collection, Australia); 'Rooster' Book, 2003, 14.5 x 11.2 x 6 cm, mixed media handmade book; *Little Miss Sci Fi*, 2008. 15 x 15 cm, mixed media on wood; *The Golden Arrow*, 2005-07. 34 x 44 x 4 cm, mixed media on wallpaper sample book (private collection, Australia); *The Turtle*, 2008-2009. 77 x 44 cm, mixed media wallpaper book, page excerpt.



Anne Marie Grgich (b.1961) grew up in Portland, Oregon and moved to Seattle in 1987, where she lived more or less continuously before returning to Portland last year. She has shown in over a hundred solo and group exhibitions since 1981. Her work is represented in public and private collections, including: Max Amann, Switzerland; Halle Saint Pierre, Museum, Paris, France; The Lois Zetter Collection, Carlsbad, NV; The Anthony Petullo Collection, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; The Chuck and Jan Rosenak Collection, Florida; Musée de la Création Franche, Bègles, France. Exhibition venues have included: American Primitive Gallery, NYC; American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, MD; Gallery Gachet, Vancouver, BC; Garde Rail Gallery, Seattle, WA; Halle Saint Pierre, Paris, France; Mark Woolley Gallery, Portland; MIA Gallery, Seattle, WA; Musée de la Création Franche, Bègles; Orange Regional Gallery, Orange, NSW; The Outsider Art Center, Minneapolis, MI; The Outsider Art Fair, NYC; Pacini Lubel Gallery, Seattle, WA; Sailors Valentine Gallery, Nantucket, MA; TAG Gallery, Nashville TN; Track 16, Santa, Monica, CA; Yard Dog Gallery, Austin, TX.

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Images: (front cover) *Yellow Butterfly Transformation Lyric*, 2009. 36 x 43 cm, mixed media on paper; (back cover) *The Opulent Goddess Book*, 2003-2009. 48.75 x 36.25 x 17.5 cm, 10 pp embedded ephemera onto two oval gold frames, with string, wire and glue.



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