



Reviews

## Rosemary Laing – a dozen useless actions for grieving blondes

Playing with the tension of the depth/surface of the self/image, Laing has cast her subjects into a series showing twelve shades of grief reminiscent of the twelve shades of blonde any one of us can become with the aid of a bottle.

Linda Daley

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Rosemary Laing  
*a dozen useless actions for grieving blondes #2* 2009  
C type photograph  
82 x 138 cm  
courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

Codes and types are two products of rationalist thinking explored by Rosemary Laing in her exhibition, *a dozen useless actions for grieving blondes*.

The series' title echoes her earlier work, *one dozen unnatural disasters in the Australian landscape* 2003 and 2005, itself an echo of a prior series, *Natural Disasters* 1988, explicitly connecting both the stages of her development as a photo artist and the logic of verbal and visual language systems. Laing's gesture of linking words and images across time can be seen as a counter-move to the separating and distinguishing that occurs within those systems of meaning, and their necessary stratagems of coding and typifying.

Laing's photographic practice has long engaged with the history of ideas, its concepts, myths and ideologies, and the place of science and technological interventions – particularly photographic technologies – within that history. Her latest exhibition is squarely within that trajectory.

The series' dominant colour is pink, both in the fluid, milky-pink of the uniform back-drop to the twelve 'blondes,' and also in the face, neck and shoulders of their skin. The horizontal streaks of the background, conveying high-speed movement – of time, of the world – pass indifferently through and beyond the blondes, who are transfixed in the perpetual present of their loss. Pink is universally coded as 'feminine,' 'girly,' 'infantile' and 'soft'. More recently, with the presence of wrist-bands, lapel ribbons and domestic appliances, it is also code for 'breast research' and the 'science dollar' to which these pink objects translate. Pink has acquired a hard edge. 'Blonde', coded as 'female', is but a short jump to its misogynist coding, 'dumb female,' a coding that evokes its own ever-expanding genre of joke.

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Rosemary Laing  
*a dozen useless actions for grieving blondes #3* 2009  
C Type photograph  
82 x 138 cm  
courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

What the source of the grief is for the blondes we do not know. The head-and-shoulder figures are marooned from an apparent cause of grief that is starkly at odds with the force of emotion displayed, thereby precluding empathy from the viewer. The physiology of the emotion is shown in the minutiae of nerves, muscles and veins that contort each face through the micro-muscular contractions between the brows and around the mouth and eyes, and through the blood's surfacing in patches of darker concentration. The extremity of each facial expression ensures that it's not readily apparent that two, if not three, of the blondes in the series are different subjects. In her exhibition notes Laing thanks three prominent Australian television, film and stage actors whose identities here merge into the anonymity of physical sameness because of the 'blondeness' of their 'useless actions' of grieving.

Denied the empathic mechanism, we might wonder – like the misogynist Laing is flirting with here – whether the source of loss is a bad hair day or a broken fingernail. In keeping us detached from the blondes' grief, just as the misogynist is from his object's singularity, what we observe rather than feel is the theatricality of the emotions' display. We see grief's performance staged for its study. In contrast to the five stages of grief and the psychical depth to which those stages refer, Laing inverts that interiority by bringing it to the surface of her subject through the display of a surfeit of the emotion's exterior effects. Playing with the tension of the depth/surface of the self/image, Laing has cast her subjects into a series showing twelve shades of grief reminiscent of the twelve shades of blonde any one of us can become with the aid of a bottle.

The images construct our detachment that enables us to think like the misogynist; to think of these individual women as types, kinds, or genres, swept together into categories of classification on the basis of one clearly visible feature of commonality and in that movement overlook their singularity of multiple differences. From the perspective of the misogynist, 'blondes' can be viewed as types as if belonging to the natural world that science has traditionally dominated.



Rosemary Laing  
*a dozen useless actions for grieving blondes #5* 2009  
C Type photograph  
82 x 138 cm  
courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

Philosopher Luce Irigaray describes the logic and stratagems of science and rationalist thinking and its reliance on detachment, solidity, and linearity, as precluding the recognition of sexual difference within systems of thought. Women are viewed as men's opposite, complement or

equivalent, but in each case, defined by the standard of Man and not as a Woman-subject in her own right. Swept into a category that denies her difference from Man in the name of rationalist thinking, and then categorised as Other to scientific inquiry, women and femininity lose their identity, lose the particularity that science would claim to isolate and know. For Irigaray, not only is femininity denied the autonomy of sexual difference from the standard of Man, but masculinity, too, is denied a bodily subjectivity, which is relinquished in order to maintain the neutral, objective and universal position of science and rationalism.

This year marks the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of naturalist, Charles Darwin. Laing's exhibition would seem to be engaging with that legacy, particularly the role that photography and photographs played in his study, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* 1872, which was one of the first scientific treatises to include photographs. Darwin sourced the photographic illustrations from five photographers, one of whom, Oscar Rejlander, specifically produced his images for the treatise, and from correspondence between the photographer and the scientist, we learn that he had great fun in doing so by posing for the photographs himself. More than a mere adjunct to the treatise, the photographs were integral to Darwin's thesis of the emotions' universality across cultures.

Darwin claims grief is more common in women and children than in men, and that it is the most difficult emotion to activate voluntarily. If it can be activated at will, says Darwin, it demonstrates the rare facility of the professional actor. Laing's wink to Darwin in her choice of subjects for the blonde series again shows that her mode of critique is not from a position outside or above, and thereby suggestive of a corrective to the tradition and logic of science, but through play, irony and mimicry, therein exposing its debts and limitations.

Rosemary Laing  
*a dozen useless actions for grieving blondes*  
23 April 2009 - 23 May 2009  
Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

Tags: [Issue 2 2009](#), [Linda Daley](#), [Rosemary Laing](#)

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