

# One of Australia's most influential photographic artists is celebrated in an exhibition that looks anew at her eclectic, playful and haunting representations of the body throughout her 40-year career

## The Body Electric

Words by Daniel Boetker-Smith

Pat Brassington has stood alone in the photographic landscape of Australia, her highly original work an enticing and unique oddity. Long associated with the theory-rich practice of the 1980s and its fascination with the psychoanalytical and the uncanny, she has remained consistent in her visual explorations, and unwaveringly hard to categorise.

Emerging four decades ago with work centred on found images and darkroom

manipulations, Brassington subsequently adopted an overtly digital approach to her work, leading to her being labelled "one of Australia's greatest living artists" by Juliana Engberg, former director of the Australian Centre For Contemporary Art. Now, *The Body Electric*, an exhibition at the Art Gallery Of New South Wales in Sydney (19 August to 11 February), takes a timely perspectival shift in the appraisal of her work, focusing not on the oft-repeated surrealist and psychological metaphors, but on her visceral and fluid representations of the body as both physical entity and poetic construct.

"This small-focus exhibition centres on Brassington's interest in the presence of the body," says exhibition curator Isobel Parker Philip, emphasising her "abject and distorted bodies projecting – in equal measure – pathology, pleasure and pain." Drawn together, Brassington's images are given a new lease of life and the exhibition engages a new narrative framework through which to view her work. "I was interested in her individual images as singular poetic stanzas," explains the curator, adding that the title of the exhibition was taken from the well-known 1855 poem *I Sing the Body Electric* by Walt Whitman, for whom the artist has a particular fondness. Additionally, says Parker Philip, "In the poem, as in Brassington's photography, the body is fragmented, and torsos, limbs and body parts are amassed and entangled in an intoxicating heap."

The last section of the poem reverts to simply listing parts of the body, ending with the line: "Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, roof of the mouth, jaws, and the jaw-hinges." The physicality of Whitman's words points to the simplicity and playfulness of Brassington's imagery, and to her interest in the minutiae of the body, both manipulated and incidental. Most intriguing is Brassington's frequently childlike approach to the construction of images that, much like Whitman's words above, are not acutely scientific or perfect but give the viewer the feeling of happening upon a cabinet of curios and obscure specimens. **BJP**

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1 *Candie*, from the series *Quill*, 2013.

2 *Drink Me*, 1997.

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