

Freda Freiberg:
Contemporary Australian Collage and its Origins

Expressive artist? Social commentator? Formalist? Chris Barry is all of these. Though she was trained specifically as a photographer, and though she displays a remarkable talent in the areas of photographic portraiture and photomontage, her work shifts between categories, genres and media, and resists ready-made classifications. Her re-photographed collaged compositions draw attention to their intricately layered formal construction. Yet they also powerfully express feelings of fragmentation and dislocation, alienation and loss, representing the experience of certain specific groups of displaced or oppressed people in Australia—Polish immigrants, industrial workers in the western suburbs of Melbourne, and women office workers.

Barry's black and white photographic portraits (of relatives and friends, in Australia and Poland) and urban landscapes (of housing commission blocks in Melbourne and Lodz, street rubble, billboards, industrial sites and shacks) are cut, multiplied, arranged, partially coloured, covered in glass, spattered with paint, and re-photographed. They are often indistinguishable from the second-hand images of people, places and flowers that she cuts out of magazines or newspapers for use in her collages.

Along with her own photography and the magazine cut-outs, she uses old photographs from the family album, old postcards, torn pieces of coloured paper, classified ads from the newspapers, pieces of string, fragments of flags, wire and broken glass. Sometimes the collage is placed upon a painted background, sometimes the black and white photographs are partially coloured, or paint is applied to the photographed background (to the pattern on the wallpaper of a room, or the window frames of a housing commission block). Sometimes, drops of paint—red or, less commonly, yellow—are spattered sparingly over the collage, like blood, or sunspots. The whole assemblage is finally produced as a photographic composition, the fragments unified, sometimes more, sometimes less...

Some aspects of her work—the multiplicity of images, the appropriation of second-hand images, the blurring of the distinction between the 'original' and the 'second-hand', the plundering of material from a range of popular media—suggest a kind of cool, post-modern playfulness. However, the work is expressive rather than cool. Feelings of dislocation and oppression are conveyed, not so much by the expressiveness of the portraits, or landscapes, as by fragmentation of the compositional elements, and multiple frames within the frame. The jagged edges of broken glass and torn paper, the drops of red paint and wire grids over the image, can be read as cries of pain, or symbols of suffering. However, the potentially melodramatic impact is offset, softened and balanced by the otherwise cool compositions, the busy density of the collages, the soft painterly backdrops and/or the powerful presence of overall compositional designs.

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