

METRO ARTS // EXHIBITION PROGRAM



DEMENTED FURY /
ATHENA THEBUS

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DEMENTED FURY

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*'I am remembering a moment at Patricia's in Melbourne with you and Andrew – I wish I had taken a photo, I had thought about it at the time. You guys looked really good surrounded by all that marble.'*¹

At different times, Athena and I have both lived in the same house in Sydney, with Andrew. A large old Paddington brick terrace lined with over a decade of share-house history; the turnover of friends-of-friends, the return of old faces in new lives, and the constant possibility of a new face to change the dynamic. Six bedrooms, shared kitchen, cheap rent, other people's mess; always on the edge of something: a long conversation over coffee, a wet-haired morning greeting, an expansive dinner on a tiny table, an overflowing kitchen sink, or a stalemate over who cleans the bathroom. No one really owns anything – furniture, jobs, friends, lovers, sexuality and food are not possessions or value-adders, but always in the quivering grasp of the house's radical contingency. Lives and homes like these are not what we're told to aspire to under capitalism. Most people want to leave share-house living by thirty, that's if they're not still living with their parents.

Share houses don't align with the normative idea of everyday life, which is why they become harder to sustain as time marches on and the pragmatic pressures of property, marriage, family, career, take a firmer hold on the psyche. These pressures constitute a self-naturalizing temporality – what queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz calls 'straight time', or the sacrificial present caught up in the service of a fantasmatic future.² Muñoz suggests that straight time defers the future by reproducing the present's aspirational, heteronormative capitalism in the name of pragmatic (or 'achievable') politics (e.g. gay marriage).

In contrast, 'queer time' is that which is 'not quite here' or 'not-quite-conscious' and is therefore a potentiality that must be insisted upon for the pragmatics of the present to be surpassed. For Muñoz: 'to live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer.' From within the temporal stranglehold of straight time, the inherent ephemerality and utopian futurity of queerness seems naïve and romantic, but Muñoz argues that 'most profoundly, utopianism represents a failure to be normal.' It is this failure that has the potential to distil a generative politics through the rejection of normative ideas of value. Muñoz calls this 'queerness as horizon'.

When Athena and I first met in Sydney, she had recently moved back to Australia from Los Angeles and I was back visiting from Paris; Andrew gave up his room for Elena and I, and the household (re)incorporated us into its fabric for a week. Through its insistence on queer time, the house made way for the coincidence of our meeting. We spoke about long distance relationships and cities; LA had obviously had a significant effect on Athena. Her voice had a North American inflection that I took as a sign of an open soul rather than as an affectation. An effect of corporeal porosity to change, fearlessness of judgment in the here and now, a queer indication of her present desire

for an LA future, and everything that place – *there* and *then* – stands for. The ‘ANGEL’ tattoo on the back of her skull, which I only saw via her exhibition at Bus Projects in Melbourne, is a physical reminder of the sacredness of hope despite, as she writes, ‘all of us being forsaken in this city where the heaven and hell of capitalism plays out.’

Playing out in Brisbane, Athena’s home city, *Demented Fury* references a line in Los Angeles writer Bret Easton Ellis’ *Lunar Park* (2005):

‘This languid lifestyle, decadent and loose, never relaxed my father. He remained, always, locked in a kind of demented fury, no matter how mellow the surface circumstances of his life really were. And because of this the world was threatening to us in a vague and abstract way we couldn’t work ourselves out of – the map had disappeared, the compass had been smashed, we were lost.’

In the novel, Ellis is haunted by his father; he wants to escape him but he cannot. For the artist, ‘demented fury’ articulates the sensation of living locked in under capitalism, without a way out. Sympathising with the demented fury of the father figure, Thebus makes her own father, as Ellis does, conceptually and materially crucial to the present work. The exhibition draws on the potential absurdity of paralleling her life and the enormous privilege described in *Lunar Park*, in order to query how different Thebus’ world really is from her father’s.

In the nineties, the artist’s mother had her husband make marble columns for the archway to the rumpus room in their family home. Fabricated with cardboard cylinders, plastered, then painted to marble effect, these columns were a point of shame for Athena growing up. Superficially, perhaps this shame is because their supposed ‘fakeness’ exposes their failure to live up to the (unattainable because always delayed) capitalist horizon of ultimate luxury. On a deeper level, the ‘fake’ marble columns exemplify an act of devotion to middle-class aspiration, to the extent that they become monuments to their own lack within the capitalist paradigm. This is exactly how the balls function in *Paris Is Burning* (1990, USA), why ‘realness’ is the desired outcome, and why Thebus sees both she and her parents as stuck in the waiting room of ‘passing’.

It is for their evocation of this lack that we can in fact interpret the columns as camp signifiers of queer time within the very grasp of the stultified middle class family home. Marble Realness. The columns, to reiterate Muñoz, reach forward to a future within the present. Recreated with her father’s help for *Demented Fury*, they create a bridge between the frustration of a wealthy father’s disillusion with the failing capitalist horizon, and a child’s anticipatory waiting for a queer future outside straight time.

To this end, both endeavours fail in the here and now, within the drudgery of the pragmatic present. But in the waiting room of queer futurity, even amongst the failed objects of the capitalist horizon, there is an over there, a potentiality that is always beyond, a way of ‘delineating the bias that underlies straight time’s measure.’³ That is, a queer future already alive in the heterosexual present.

¹ The artist in an email to the author, 12 August 2015

² All José Esteban Muñoz quotes from *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, NYU Press, New York 2009

³ Ibid.

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