

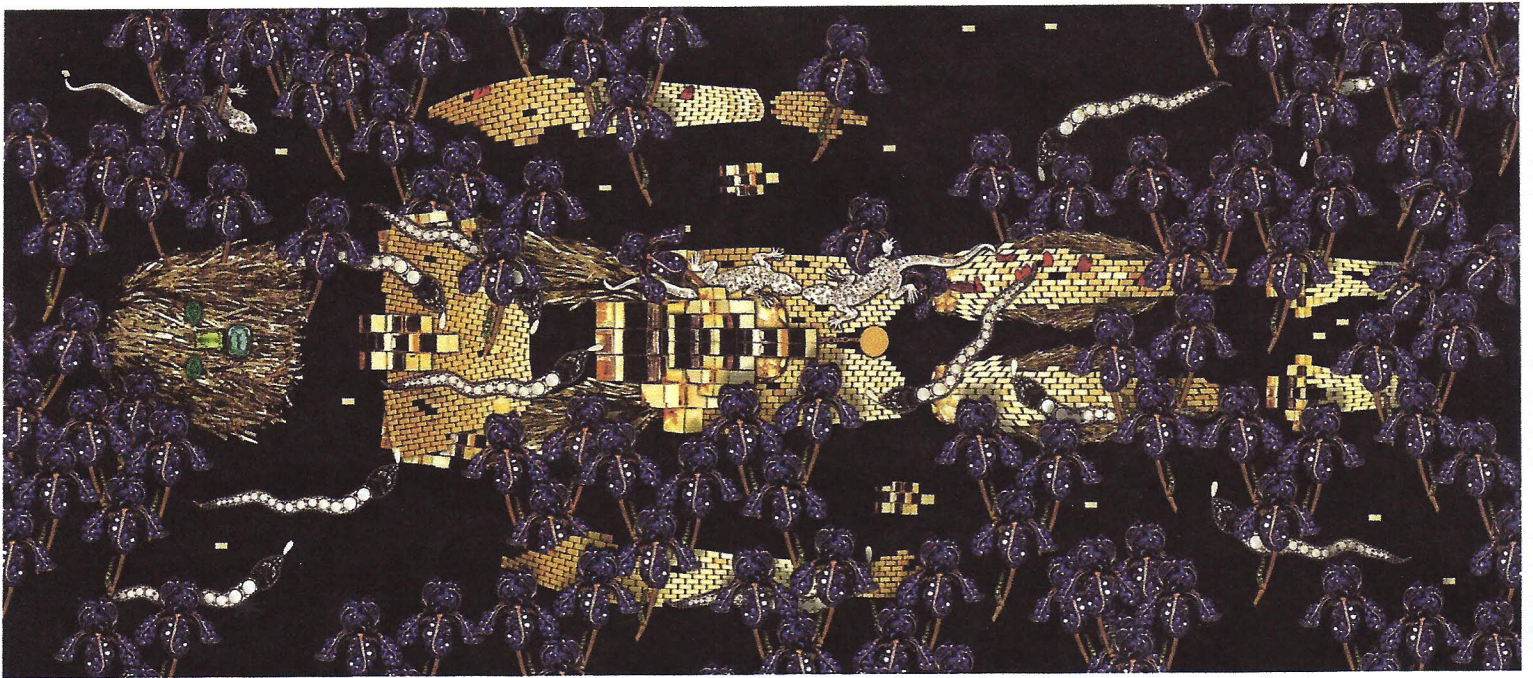
*The botany of desire*

RICHARD ORJIS'S GARDENS OF EARTHLY DELIGHT

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MUD-SMEARED YOUNG MEN, choked by wreaths of hellebore and phallic pitcher plants, orchids issuing from their mouths like Mayan speech bubbles; a black hoodie vomiting lilies and gorse; a gleaming black car packed with hothouse bromeliads, Spanish moss and pink penile anthuriums; more young men, smeared in coal dust this time, holding up lighters while one of them sings in piercing falsetto around the 'shrine' of a shining car – these are just some of the arresting images Richard Orjis has produced within the last half decade.

Working primarily in photography, with occasional sorties into installation and performance, Orjis's evolving cache of iconography includes flowers, candles, Alsatian dogs, baguettes and more flowers. Almost always, the nature/culture (false) dichotomy is what animates these gorgeous portraits, for portraits they are, whether or not a human subject is involved. But Orjis has no desire to capture with his camera that highly contested notion called 'reality'; instead, he constructs worlds teeming with dramatic rituals, in which arcane interrelationships play out.

Like the images of hothouse orchids whose pixels he preens with Photoshop, Orjis thrives in artificial environments. Flowers bloom exponentially under his expert touch, candles illuminate the strangest of places, and testicular-shaped kumara and burning bushes hover against an ever-black cosmic backdrop of biblical import. Mining the original meaning of the word 'glamour', old Scottish for magic and enchantment, Orjis creates scenarios of

savage beauty. That he has been a sometime collaborator with Cuban-American photographer Anthony Goicolea is unsurprising: witness the unabashed use of cutting, splicing and superimposition in order to create a whole narrative within a single frame. But whereas Goicolea's manically maladjusted self-portraiture pushes narcissism to its limits, Orjis's project is to beautify the world around him. His imaginative photographic reworkings turn the raw materials of suburbia – boys, potplants, dogs, dumbbells – into clandestine cult objects for the elect of what he once termed 'My Empire of Dirt', the title of his graduation show from Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts.

Orjis might be more fruitfully compared with the late great Robert Mapplethorpe, whose photographic lexicon oscillated between floral still lifes and graphic sadomasochism. Orjis, however, marries Mapplethorpe's extremes in a package that is more about symbiosis than contrast, more implicit than explicit, more open-ended than in-your-face. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that Mapplethorpe worked primarily in black and white, while Orjis delights in all the complicated hues of the spectrum, in particular a royal, or even papal, purple. If cultural critic Dave Hickey located Mapplethorpe as a modern classicist, returning to the timeless and supposedly universal characteristics of beauty, then Orjis must be post-classical with his software-assisted remixes; Mapplethorpe's perfect lilies are out-perfected by Orjis's Photoshopped orchids. Both artists, however, use photography as a



magical tool to capture Beauty before s/he is ravaged by Time.

A recent development in Orjis's practice veers away from propagated hyper-beauty and into the realm of fabulist funerary art. Mimicking the language of the tomb, Orjis has created a triptych of faux-pharaonic golden vistas that are jaw-dropping for their sheer bling. In the artist's recently published monograph *Park* (2011), performance poet David Eggleton dubs this direction 'computer-age vanitas'. The triptych's centrepiece is *Bed in*, 2010. Like Tutankhamun with a bed pal, the title nods to a John and Yoko-like duo entertaining paparazzi for eternity in the afterlife. Other great moments in 'couple art' spring to mind, such as in 1983 when Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh tied themselves together with a 2.4-metre rope for a year. Only in this case, it's for all time. Mostly, though, *Bed in* reminds me of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (perfect lovers)*, 1991, two identical clocks that are forever in sync, because Orjis's golden couple are almost exactly the same as each other. This is not a case of opposites attracting, but of like attracting like. In the 1990s married performance artists Genesis P. Orridge and Lady Jaye underwent multiple body modifications in the hope of creating one 'pandrogynous' being, and the figures in *Bed in* are similarly neither male, female, human nor android but contain elements of all of these. Mostly they are just fabulous, with their shaggy golden manes and grinning diamond grills, their silver noses and almond-shaped sapphires for eyes.

On *Bed in*'s left, *Hope it's not too late*, 2010, features a

second robot creature, wounded and lying prone in a field of bejewelled irises. Or rather, the irises are growing *through* the chinks in his golden chain-links, like tree roots through the ruins around Angkor Wat, while silver snakes and skinks nibble at his extremities. He does resemble a twenty-first-century version of a golden reclining Buddha, though, being wounded as he is, he's more likely to have dropped out of a fable akin to the Technicolor fantasy of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), as when Dorothy and her friends succumb to sweet lethe and fall asleep in a field of poppies. If anything, his lassitude recalls the work of another New Zealand artist, Peter Madden, and his work *Sleeps with moths*, 2008, a sculpture of a black skeleton, prone yet sprouting twigs which are covered in moths and mushrooms; each artist portrays decay and death (respectively) as exquisite moments of introspection and regeneration.

The third image in this series, *Beehive*, 2010, is more abstract. There are no personified robot creatures, although a large phallic amethyst crystal operates as a kind of strap-on to a furniture-like assemblage of white tabletops and metal chair legs. Two golden bees feed on what resembles a honeycomb, but is more likely a fugitive from a coral reef. Everything takes place against a backdrop of golden plastic sheeting, so shiny you can almost hear it squeaking on your teeth. The high-key metallics of this entire series seem to have a rather dental *affect* – here the golden honeycomb is sweet enough to taste, you can imagine it sticking to your precious pearly-whites like a good old Violet Crumble (that



opposite, top to bottom

*Like a flame*, 2008

Photographic print, 122 x 116 cm

Courtesy the artist, Melanie Roger Gallery, Auckland, and McNamara Gallery, Whanganui

*Ever*, 2009

Photographic print, 99 x 120 cm

Courtesy the artist and Melanie Roger Gallery, Auckland

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*Flower idol*, 2006

Photographic print, 98 x 84 cm

Courtesy the artist and Melanie Roger Gallery, Auckland

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*A kind of hush*, 2008

Photographic print, 90 x 90 cm

Courtesy the artist and Melanie Roger Gallery, Auckland

chocolate bar could easily bequeath its poetic name to *Hope it's not too late* with its decaying, honey-coloured robot in a field of purple flowers).

Orjis's works are open to reshuffling like tarot cards, whose meanings shift depending on the interrelationships of the parts. *Bed in* made an appearance as the centrepiece of a different series displayed in Auckland's Bledisloe Walkway Light Boxes from July to October 2010. Designed as a visual palindrome to be walked past, *Bed in* was flanked by flowers and, at either end, by two pedigree Alsatian dogs, archetypal canine protectors called *Ever* and *Forever* (both 2008). These guardians referred to Cerberus or Chinese temple lions, underscoring the fact that *Bed in* is indeed talismanic art for the underworld. Between *Bed in* and the trusty canines, a series of four photographs of a 'garden' unfolded. At first, you noticed the pastel-perfect tulips (and yes, an iris and a poppy or two) and, of course, the omnipresent candles that Orjis, the ex-altar boy, delights in so much. Then appeared the bones of a skeleton nestled among the flowers and, again, I thought of Madden's *Sleeps with moths*, even though this skeleton was gleaming white and not the blackened bones of Madden's creation. Finally, whitish lumps emerged as raw bread dough, rising among the tulips as perhaps a reference to Christ's resurrection, though more likely just because Orjis likes to play with unruly substances, namely mud, coal and candle wax.

The bizarre light-box ensemble finds resonance in a description in Michael Pollan's book *The Botany of Desire* (2001) of a Turkish sultan who took such pride in his tulip garden that it became a multimedia extravaganza. On special evenings, the cultivated bulbs were supplemented by thousands of cut stems in glass bottles, with strategically placed mirrors effectively doubling the impact. Guests were required to wear colours that would complement those of

the tulips, and candles were placed between the flowers and on the backs of hundreds of giant tortoises, which became mobile lighting units for nightly performances featuring courtesans, eunuchs and songbirds. Orjis shares this penchant for luxe, not just with the Blue Mosque's Sultan Ahmed, but with Des Esseintes, the anti-hero of J. K. Huysmans's 1884 novel *Against Nature*. Des Esseintes is an aesthete who owns a jewel-encrusted turtle and keeps an extravagant collection of artificial flowers because, like Orjis's Photoshopped florals, they surpass the real thing.

Even as Orjis revels in the control the computer bestows, there is still something of the nature baby in him. Readers of the artist's monograph might discover the double-page spread of a photo simply called *Meadow*, 2010, full of glorious wildflowers and weeds. Orjis's interest in this unruly space of untamed nature has led him, paradoxically, to *construct* a space in which it might occur. Outside Auckland's Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts in September 2010, Orjis designated a circle on the lawn to remain uncut for twelve months – *Grass circle*, 2010–11. In the middle of the suburban enclave of Pakuranga, this amounts to aesthetic terrorism – illustrated by the fact that a well-meaning lawnmower mistakenly 'did the gallery a favour' by ridding them of this eyesore, despite the circle's clear demarcation with bricks. While *Grass circle* is once again wild and unruly, Orjis knows that the duel between the untamed forces of nature and our desire to control, to perfect and even to replace these forces with artificial counterparts is eternal – and eternally in the balance. Orjis asks us to watch this contested space.

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*I hope it's not too late*, 2010, photographic print, 65 x 150 cm, courtesy the artist and McNamara Gallery, Whanganui; *Bed in*, 2010, photographic print, 11 x 160 cm, courtesy the artist and McNamara Gallery, Whanganui; *The golden beehive*, 2010, photographic print, 20 x 20 cm, courtesy the artist and Melanie Roger Gallery, Auckland