

ARCANA IN SATIN PAJAMAS:  
A RICHARD ORJIS LEXICON

Written by Tessa Laird

*So Give Me The Night* at Papakura Art Gallery in 2012 was significant for being the first survey of Richard Orjis's work, exhibiting a selection of photographs and drawings from the past six years. This show performed the same function as Orjis's spectacular monograph *Park*, also released in 2012, and both publication and exhibition enfolded innumerable narratives. Bifurcations of thought, motif and media make up this protean practice, but somehow they all share the logic of a particular sensibility – an *Orjis* sensibility. Jumping from candle encrusted barbells, to triangular swatches of the Milky Way, to a field of blooming weeds, all seems perfectly *natural* (a very charged word for Orjis, as we shall see).

The survey show played a different role to *Park*, saying more with less, but nevertheless encoding eclectic messages via the constant refrain of certain themes, including the natural and the artificial, sexuality, beauty and mortality. These seemingly oppositional concepts are intertwined like rapacious vines in Orjis's practice, and he returns to them like a hummingbird to a flower.

So here is a first attempt at a Richard Orjis lexicon – a record of some of the images and ideas that pop up with the regularity of spring bulbs in his complex and varied oeuvre.

— BLING

**Jewels, like Orjis's visual lexicon, are multi-faceted. In *Bed In* (2010) two tinsel-n-foil bots sit bolt upright in bed, swathed in Swarovski, dripping with diamonds. *Hope It's Not Too Late* (2010) features a bot made of the golden links of watch straps (Rolex, of course), expiring in a field of amethyst irises; costume jewellery by Chanel or Versace.**

**These are not the dusty heirlooms of a fading aristocracy, they are sharp and shiny blood diamonds dug up in war-torn Africa and worn on the gleaming grills of American rappers. They are the chintzy baubles of legions of new Russian millionaires. They are synthetic gems, made in the hyper-sterile environment of the lab rather than the bowels of the earth. They are the piercing, glistening light of Captial, of 'success', exemplified by excess. They are beauty at its most cruel and merciless. See also GOLD and SHEEN.**

— BONES

BONES are the bleached remains of our ancestors, the ghoulish reminders of our eventual fate. Unlike BLING, BONES are old and crusty. But, like BLING, BONES can be decorative too – just look at the Giger-like bone chandeliers of the Sedlec Ossuary in the Czech Republic, or the repulsive arrangement of body parts in politically-motivated Colombian slaughters in the shape of a ‘vase of flowers’.

But BONES can also be phallic – long, tapering, with bulbous bases – and Orjis has a boner for death. In *Park* (2010) he hides a skeleton beneath CANDLES and TULIPS in a macabre night picnic. He is like a DOG with a BONE, digging in the DIRT to hide his stash for future repast, a gnawing that will engender excessive production of saliva.

— BOY

BOY oh BOY there are a lot of BOYS in Orjis's photographs, and even his performances, as in *Welcome To the Jungle* (2008), in which willing young men stripped to the waist and smeared themselves in coal dust. *Flower Idol* (2006) and *Spleen* (2007) are both muddy BOYS festooned with flowers. *Tama* (2010) is one BOY twice, with and without the mud. Dry, his eyes are piercing, a challenge. But glistening with the wet stuff he looks down, shy and shamed.

Other Orjis BOYS are not smeared in mud but drawn with it, made from DIRT just like it says in the Bible, and they are named *David* and *John* (both 2005). Shaggy-haired spectres, they are figments called into being via a process of divination.

— BREAD

BREAD is the staff of life and a staff is a phallic, stick-like thing. Like *a flame* (2008) features a baguette acting as a candlestick holder, while in *Out of the Dark* (2008) squishy buns support two candles. In Catholic Communion, the Eucharist is bread that becomes the body of Christ through a process of transubstantiation. It's a simple miracle, just the way that dough is sure to rise. In *Park* it's not just BONES, but also dough that festers beneath the festive flames of CANDLES and TULIPS. This could be the body of Christ or Christ Know Who, a ritual sacrifice of nourishment: giving back to the earth.

— CANDLE

The CANDLE is Orjis's ultimate phallic symbol, rigid, upright like

Apollo, burning with desire, yet sputtering and oozing over everything, like Dionysus – just look at those dripping barbells in *An End to Words* (2009) or the BONES, dough and flowers of the opulent, ritualistic night garden of *Park. Powder* (2010) is a snowy wonderland studded with waxy burning sentinels, while *Eighth* (2010) is the waxy remainders of a DIY Pink and White Terraces, once considered the Eighth Wonder of the World. Orjis is always making experimental candelabras, like *R.A.O.* (2008), a self-portrait of Richard Anthony Orjis as a melting black death's head, or *Paternal* (2008), in which a soot smeared father holds up his milky white baby daughter in an almost Satanic inversion of the Madonna with Child. Orjis the ex-altar boy maintains the ritual of Catholicism while jettisoning the dogma. His photographic CANDLES are unblinking, eternal reminders of mortality. What goes up must come down, but the flame of desire just keeps on burning.

— DARKNESS

Almost all Orjis's photographs take place against a black ground – an interminable, seamless darkness, a void that is nonetheless procreative (see DIRT). Some of Orjis's earlier photographic experiments involved shooting trees and undergrowth at night, creating eerie landscapes in which all kinds of unknown terrors might be lurking (see *Night* and *The Birds*, both 2005). But subsequently, Orjis's deep black grounds take us out of the landscape and into the mind – black is the interior of our heads, a cinematic enclosure into which are projected the iconographies of our fantasies. The ‘dream factory’ is not a place in America, it is located within each of us, though Orjis's boasts higher production values than most.

— DIRT

It started with mud. Drawing and painting with liquified DIRT, as though it were watercolour: trees, SKULLS, BOYS, hearts and flowers – even, recently, an opulent Persian rug. Then the mud got smeared on the faces, and sometimes bodies of BOYS. Then it was coal dust smeared over naked torsos in *Welcome to the Jungle*. Finally Orjis turned his attention to the products of mother earth – the untamed WEEDS of *Meadow* (2010), and of *Grass Circle* (2010-2011), an actual circle of grass which remained unmown for a year.

Orjis's work is fecund – flowers erupt out of blackness like seeds



from 'black magic' seedling mix. Soil is smeared on BOYs in a timeless fertility RITUAL. Orjis's "Empire of Dirt" proliferates like worms in compost. A carnal love of DIRT flies in the face of the universal fear of mortality, embracing decay as its own beauty.

— DOG

Orjis's canine guardians *Ever and Forever* (2009) reappear with the enduring regularity that their names imply. Like the primed ORCHIDs that Orjis favours, these purebred Alsations are perfect specimens. Flanking many an Orjis installation, including the publication *Park*, they are like bookends, or temple guardians. They emphasise loyalty and protection, in this life, and beyond.

— FOREST

Trees appear in Orjis's oeuvre. They feature singly in the soil-on-paper work *Tree* (2005) and in *Pagan Scents* (2007) – in which the tree features as a burning bush, and as tangled masses in *Night* and *The Birds*. The European Forest and the New Zealand Bush both symbolise the vulnerability of man (BOY?) lost but maybe not alone in nature, where the sun don't shine.

— GALAXY

In keeping with his penchant for 'Heaven's Gate Aesthetics', Orjis has played with the typography and the galactic background imagery of the ill-fated milenial group. His Billboard project for Te Tuhi YES (2008) floated the letters Y, E, and S against a starry night sky, a joyful affirmation in the face of the incomprehensible cosmos and perhaps a hint at the similarly affirmative Yoko Ono artwork that got the avant garde artist and the rock star together, giving rise to the original *Bed In*. More recently, the galactic triangle of *Cluster* (2010) has appeared, singly, and side by side with its sparkly doppelganger in *Cluster* (2011), as well as superimposed over floral weeds in *Of Quiet Volcanoes* (2012). The gleaming black triangle could be the Milky Way, or a heap of glinting shards of coal: outer space meets inner earth. The triangular peak is a hieroglyph for VOLCANO. Orjis enjoys this geometric reductionism, he has even painted himself as a gold circle – see *Self Portrait (as a gold circle)* (2009). Likewise, *Cluster* (2010) could be a self portrait, while *Cluster* (2011) is a portrait of a couple side-by-side, just like *Bed In*. Twinkle twinkle!

— GOLD

There is a wealth of the golden stuff in Orjis's oeuvre: in the chain-links and shaggy manes of his pseudo-bots in *Bed In* and *Hope It's Not Too Late*, and in the whole glistening ground of *The Golden Beehive* (2010). GOLD is both the flashy embodiment of new wealth (see BLING), and the element with the oldest pedigree. Speaking of pedigree, DOGS may be man's best friend, while diamonds are a girl's best friend. But GOLD is the essence of man's soul, and nowhere is this more apparent than in *Self Portrait (as a gold circle)*.

In order to cement this bond between GOLD and man in timeless perpetuity, Orjis created *Gold Skull* (2005) out of gold leaf and soil on paper, taking man and metal back to their respective tomb and womb.

— ORCHID

It must be commented on that Orjis's interest in this most exotic and waxy of flowers was a homophonic inevitability. With a name that rhymes with 'gorgeous' and is assonant and alliterative with ORCHID, he is naturally unnaturally attracted to the decadent dandies of the flowerworld. In fact, the word ORCHID is derived from the Greek Orchis, meaning testicle because of the bulb-like shape of some of the flower's tubers.

ORCHIDs WREATH BOYs – see *Flower Idol*, *Spleen* and *Gorse and Orchids* (2007). Pedigree sprays dance across black grounds like stars in the night sky – see *A Kind of Hush*, *The Children*, and *Sisters of the Moon* (all 2008). Even *Karen* (2008), a seemingly abstract blur of pink, is in fact an ORCHID seen so close-up, so blurred by desire that it's gone into supernova.

Like the famous wasp that regularly attempts sexual congress with an orchid he mistakes for a mate, Orjis sees in the ORCHID elaborate games of sexual deception. This most artificial looking of flowers is the ultimate symbol of tail-chasing perfection; preened first by breeders, then Photoshop, ORCHIDs nevertheless remain nature's best-dressed emissaries.

— PURPLE

Apart from the dark, lacquered black that is omnipresent in Orjis's oeuvre, the green that is concomitant with plantlife, the metallic sheen of gold, or the dull brown of earth, the colour that recurs most in the Orjis oeuvre is PURPLE. It lurks in the velvet tongues of ORCHIDs, in the crushed violets and pansies of *Wreath* (2006), in the



indigo flames of a bearded iris in *Park*, or the bejewelled irises of *Bed In* and *Hope It's Not Too Late*. It's in the giant phallic amethyst crystal of *The Golden Beehive* poised for lift-off, as well as in the gloomy PURPLE cast of light on tree trunks in *Night*, or the mauve tufts of pennyroyal in *A Place in the Dirt* (2007).

Purple is Papal, is Royal, is a colour that requires initiation and maybe even birthright. In ritualistic clothing it was the product of millions of crushed sea snails, but in flowers and feathers it is the colour at the end of those visible to humans. PURPLE is the colour that leads into the beyond, the ultraviolet that birds and bees see. It is proximity to these other worlds that lends this colour the most mystery in our visible spectrum.

— RITUAL

Much of Orjis's oeuvre seems to be about RITUAL and its trappings, from CANDLES to WREATHS to jewels and arcane symbols. Most importantly, RITUALS require bodies, and Orjis feeds the universe his cast of real and imaginary BOYS, whether drawn from soil and dreams or photographed from life, smeared in mud or coal dust.

While many of Orjis's photographs appear RITUAListic, he has also created performances involving himself and others in camp pagan enactments, in which the artist, like Andy Warhol, hides behind a shaggy mane, while beautiful bodies mingle with flowers, DIRT and flames. Orjis revels in the confusion of codes: the sacred and the profane. The upholding of tradition gives rise to its inverse: the secret rites of heretics.

— SHEEN

All of Orjis's photographs are glossy, with the toxic SHEEN of automotive paint. In *Welcome to the Jungle* the coal-smeared bodies of BOYS surrounded a brand new lacquer-black Subaru Legacy filled with ORCHIDS and bromeliads, a hearse for the new millenium. Gold and silver and jewels are welcomed back into Orjis's pagan pantomime again and again. The starry sky gleams and glints from a heap of glitter in *Cluster*, everything sparkles with the sweat of desire, promise of sex, which is like a dew drop on the tongue of consumers everywhere – longing sublimated into an endless surface of SHEEN.

— SKULL

Nothing is more redolent of human mortality than the SKULL, that

container of history and telltale remnant of decay. This is the way of all flesh, but the SKULL's insistence on gatecrashing Orjis's decadent pagan parties only serves to make the pulchritude of the present all the more enticing in its fleeting, inevitably fading glory.

Orjis's SKULLs are painted with soil, with gold leaf, and/or issuing flowers or mushrooms from their multiple orifices. The SKULL is a tapu bowl for the soul and also a site of mystical rejuvenation. This human artefact both attests to the destruction and the preservation of the spirit that moves.

— TULIP

The TULIP is a squeaky-clean penis of a flower. Issuing from testicular bulbs, the elastic, springy stem terminates in another bulb – transformed from its muddy roots into perfect, plastic pearlescence. TULIPs come to life in spring, out of that loamy earth they point their perky heads, a symbol of rising desire. There is a lot of 'rising' going on in *Park*, what with BREAD dough and exhumed skeletons amongst bobbing TULIPs, yellow this time, visually rhyming with the numerous CANDLE flames. These springy blooms are back in *Tulips and Foil* (2012), white and with ruffled feathers against a bandaid-pink ground, with patches of silver foil, whited-out like platinum clouds of fancy (see also SHEEN).

— VOLCANO

Auckland, so the official story goes, is built upon 53 dormant volcanoes. Auckland is also Tāmaki-makau-rau – Tāmaki of a hundred lovers – an extraordinarily desirable site, in spite (or perhaps because) of this volcanic history. Rumbling deep under the city's phallic cones is the red lava of desire.

Volcanic volatility is evident in *The Eighth*, a tribute to the Pink and White Terraces which were destroyed by the eruption of Mount Tarawera in 1886. Certainly, there's no smoke without fire, and *Smoke* (2009) is a plume of ashes, like a whale spouting, or an ejaculation seeding the black void (many plants require being blackened and burned to promote germination).

The triangular peak – visual code for mountain – is proliferating, as with *Cluster* and *Of Quiet Volcanoes* that was also the name of a 2012 exhibition in which the centrepiece was a picnic table such as you might find on a local mountain, but here covered in volcanic



ceramics. Lumpy, glazed blobs both aped the form of the VOLCANO and its offspring, the misshapen rocks spewing forth from its suppurating maw. *Clouds* (2012), a photographic montage on the same bandaid-pink as *Tulips and Foil* shows not pretty patches of cumulus, but roiling, boiling bursts of volcanic smoke, the venting desire of one hundred lovers. And in a work called *Land of 100 Lovers* (2012) against a TULIP-yellow ground, collages of couples, mountains and lit, testicular CANDLEsticks peep out from between jagged cuts of black obsidian rock: another product of the volcano known for its SHEEN and ability to cut out the beating hearts of BOYS.

— WEEDS

Orjis loves the squeaky clean of SHEEN, but he also has a penchant for DIRT. Although he loves the pedigree of show ORCHIDS or the plastic perfection of TULIPS he is equally interested in the unkempt spaces where WEEDS breed, as in the Elam gully where he took the creeping moody panoramic photo *Night*. So while *Powder Puff* (2009) documents the regimented environment of an ORCHID hothouse, *Meadow* captures a wild space of flowering grasses – a space he attempted to recreate with *Grass Circle*. Like Orjis's other dichotomies that might be summed up best in the timeless battle, dance and occasional embrace between Apollo and Dionysus, WEEDS are to ORCHIDS and TULIPS what rebellious pagans are to state sanctioned rituals; they are the triumphant decay of poised perfection.

— WREATH

The WREATH combines two of Orjis's favourite symbols – the flower and the circle. Perfectly self-contained, the WREATH is both spoils of the victor and memorial to the dead. The WREATH can symbolise power as with *Flower Idol*, or strangling subjugation as with *Spleen*. And while *Wreath* is a concoction of penile pitcher plants and ORCHIDS, *A Place in the Dirt* is a WREATH in absentia – simply a circle of soil made at the centre of some WEEDS.

Orjis's circles of GOLD, grass, DIRT, flowers and WEEDS are each an ouroboros, the snake that eats its own tail. They are perfectly contained worlds that maintain their own cycles of life and death. Their dessicated presence at burial sites thousands of years old attests to the eternal connection between man and flower and their mutual cycles; the eternal return to the DARKNESS and DIRT.



**FLOWER IDOL**  
photographic print  
2006



**SPLEEN**  
photographic print  
2007

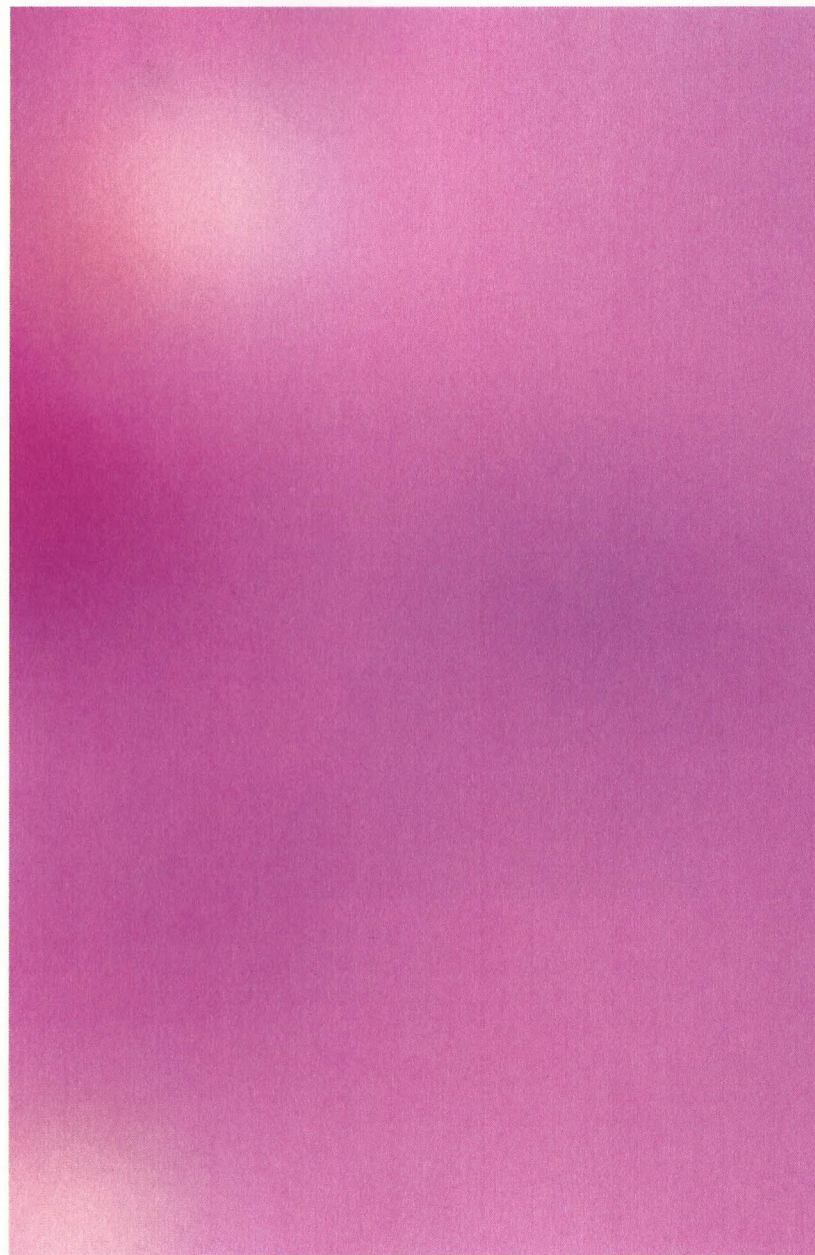


**FOREVER**  
photographic print  
2009

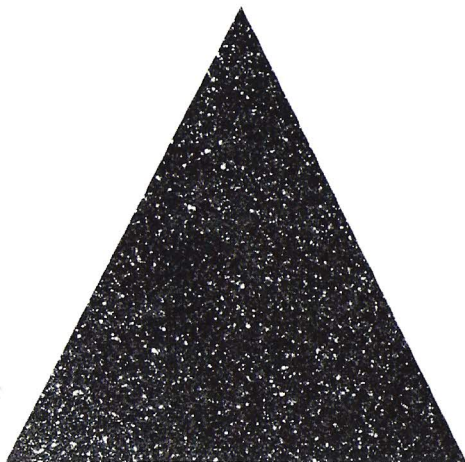




**SMOKE**  
photographic print  
2009



**KAREN**  
photographic print  
2008



**CLUSTER**  
photographic print  
2010

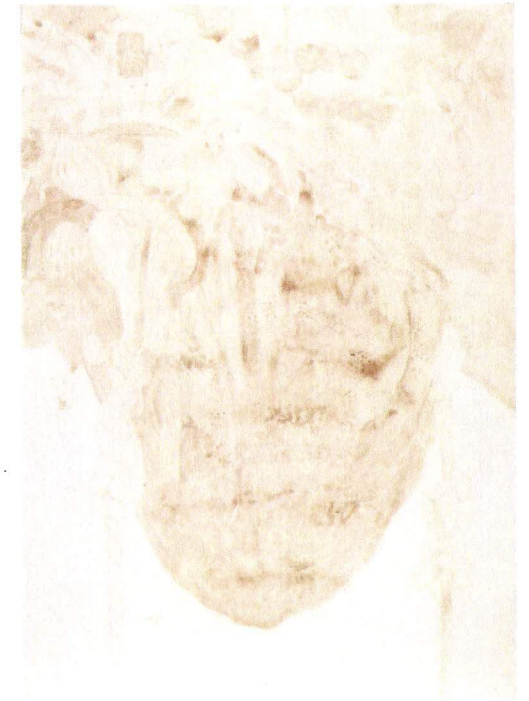


**SHELTER**  
soil on paper  
2011





**SMOKIN' THE HIVE**  
soil on paper  
2011



**MILK & HONEY**  
soil on paper  
2011



**SKULL**

soil on paper  
2011



**PARADISE**

soil and tea on paper  
2012





**CLOUDS**  
ink on paper  
2012



**LAND OF 100 LOVERS**  
ink on paper  
2012

“Thanks to Tracey Williams, Anna Rae and the team at the Papakura Art Gallery for making possible the exhibition So Give Me The Night : The Art Of Richard Orjis, and for helping to create a vibrant and engaging space for contemporary art in South Auckland. A special thanks to Tessa Laird for her illuminating writing, and to Ron Brownson from the Auckland Art Gallery for hosting the most enjoyable discussion regarding an exhibition I have ever been involved in. And a special thanks to Melanie Roger and Harry McNaughton for their ongoing support.”

— Richard Orjis 23 January 2013

The Papakura Art Gallery team gratefully acknowledges the generosity and support of Richard Orjis and Melanie Roger Gallery.



Published by Papakura Art Gallery (Auckland Council, Arts and Culture) on the occasion of the exhibition *So Give Me The Night : The Art Of Richard Orjis* held at Papakura Art Gallery from 13 October to 17 November 2012.

Edited by Tracey Williams.

Designed by Nell May.

ISBN : 978-0-473-23649-6

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