

# richard orjis

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Born Wanganui 1979

MFA Elam 2006

Lives in Auckland

Richard Orjis is primarily a photographer, but he also does his own special version of watercolours and makes small sculptures. All his work is designed to illustrate non-existent, shadowy social groups. In his own words: 'I create ritualistic or cult-like imagery that deals with the conflict between humans and nature, nature being defined as environments, both physical and psychological, that are not created or controlled by humans. While natural landscapes can be sublime in their beauty, they are also places that can be dangerous, hostile and destructive. Furthermore, the night offers an historical stage for rituals to take place, as the blackness gives a sense of mystery and ambiguity that is consistent throughout my work.'

Orjis' earlier works comprise some six separate photographic series, most depicting odd group activities, such as young people anointing each other with syrup. Perhaps the most compelling of these is the *Upstate* series of 2004. A group of men wearing boots and identical military camouflage capes were observed at night in a snowy wilderness. They lugged straw, lit fires, rigged traps, tried to cover themselves and had apparently shot a deer. Whether they were on an exercise or just trying to survive was unknowable.

While the theme of groups of people, mainly male, engaged in ambiguous activity has been consistent in Orjis' work since 2002, it is his work of the last two years that has attracted particular attention. This is because the artist has pushed his created events from the unusual, but possibly understandable, to the very brink of believability. Over the same period he has reduced the number of figures in his tableaux from six or more to one, and has darkened the backgrounds to place greater emphasis on the main subjects. Those subjects are extraordinary indeed. They appear to be a group of



*Flower Idol*, 2006. Photographic print, 978 x 838 mm.





Europeans who have gone feral in a tropical jungle. Covered wholly or partially in mud, they stare dully out at the camera through elaborate necklaces and garlands of brightly coloured, sensuous flowers. Phallic and vulval forms dominate the arrangements (pitcher plants and orchids). The figures are passive and unthreatening, but also generate frissons of evil and madness and exert a horrid fascination. Mud was the medium of Orjis' graduation show in 2006, *My Empire of Dirt*. Using mud and water, he did a fey series of works on paper depicting semi-clad figures singly and in groups. Some scenes were set in woodland, and the heads of some figures seemed to have morphed into grotesque wood galls. Others wore helmets.

Associated with the flower/mudmen, Orjis makes primitive fetish objects, small hessian-covered sculptures such as snakes, voodoo dolls and clubs. They are exactly the sorts of things one might expect to find when coming upon the mudmen's secret meeting house.

Above: *Out of the Dark*, 2008. Photographic print, 1200 x 900 mm.

Right: *Paternal*, 2008. Photographic print, 1190 x 840 mm.

