

SILKE RAETZE - A SURREALIST IS BORN

ATL interviews artist Silke Raetze. The artist subverts notions of feminine beauty and elegance in her latest work.



Elegant Surrender (golden wattle), 2011.
Oil on canvas with stitched linen & canvas. 115 x 100 cm

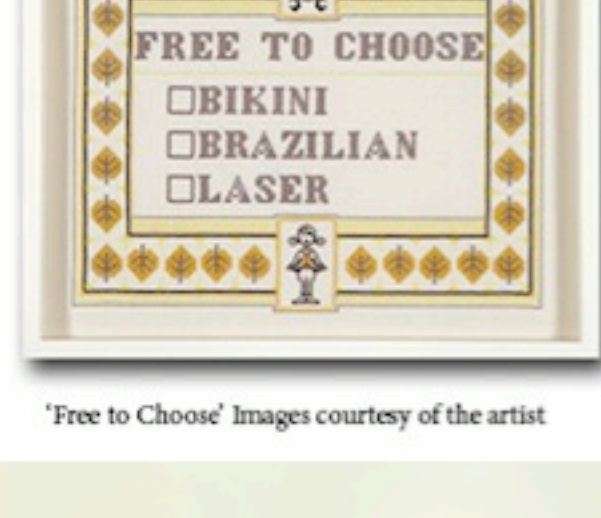


Silke Raetze, Sydney
Image by Cameron Roy

Young Sydney artist Silke Raetze grabbed the media spotlight at the end of last year with her *Mayflower* needlepoint series, like old-fashioned samplers, chronicling her experiences of online dating. Instead of "Home Sweet Home", there's "Mr Options Open" and "Mr Hot 'n' Cold". A striking and effective subversion. In her current show at Michael Reid Gallery, she offers three new cross-stitched works along the (ironic) theme of *Free to Choose*.

These form one component of the exhibition; the other is a series of oil paintings grouped under the title *Elegant Surrender*. Here, female torsos with flowers or feathers in place of heads pose in lacy slips and bras.

They seem to be struggling to hold up the mass of decoration; in some the flowers seem to burst from their throats, in others the sheer volume threatens to topple over. Hands hold up the foliage (their heads, their hair?), reach for a fallen strap. Arms are chopped off – like a Grecian statue – or have become detached in the effort of keeping it all together. Stitching appears here too: look closely at each meticulously painted canvas and note the fine stitches – meandering around the edges of petals or lace, or bits of raw or painted linen that are subtly and carefully sewn onto the painting as a form of embellishment. There's a lot going on in these pictures: the references to classical sculpture with the torsos and draping of fabric, the surreal flowers and feathers for heads (in one painting roses burst from the throat of an inverted head, like a vase), the chopped off arms and stylised hands.



'Free to Choose' Images courtesy of the artist

"Flowers and feathers are representative of a kind of beauty that humans want to possess and own," says Raetze. She explains: exotic plumage has historically been used in fashion, decorating hats for example, (the bird has to die) and cut blooms are already in a state of decay. "It's a concept of beauty that's been held and harnessed – is she accepting that beauty is going to decay, or fighting against it?"



Hoodwinked (roses), 2011
Oil on canvas with stitched linen & canvas

Silke Raetze describes her paintings as "somewhere between a still life and a portrait." A look around her studio offers up clues: a hot pink lacy slip dangles from a hook – "lace is just so feminine, it's got a fragility and a strength to it" – and pinned to a notice board are stylised black and white portraits of Audrey Hepburn and Marlene Dietrich. The artist is fascinated by, and drawn to celebrate female elegance, but at the same time she's conscious of the effort involved, what goes on behind the scenes to look beautiful. She's deeply interested in the natural world too – her painted orchids and wattle are almost botanic in detail and a series of works based on *Birds of Paradise* was recently displayed at The Australian Museum. Raetze is intrigued by how we fight change. "The natural order of things is change," she says. "In Buddhism, one of the first things they say is that you have to be in a state of impermanence. We really battle against change – we'll never be happy if that's the case."



"Look closely at each meticulously painted canvas and note the fine stitches"

Below: Pinned to a notice board are stylised black and white portraits of Audrey Hepburn and Marlene Dietrich



Raetze is attracted by surrealist absurdity; the way pushing the boundaries of logic can reach a deeper truth. Violence and loveliness, effort and nonchalance, control and disarray are held in marvellous tension in these beautifully crafted pictures. Each work takes considerable time to create. It's hardly surprising to learn that Raetze and her husband (the "Mr Motown" of the *Mayflower* series, yes it was a happy ending!) don't own a TV. During the day, she paints in the studio and in the evenings she stitches and he reads. Charmingly old-fashioned. A bit like elegance, really.



Love me love me not (delphiniums), 2011
Oil on canvas with stitched linen & canvas. 77 x 66 cm

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Photograph: Silke Raetze, Sydney by Cameron Roy

other images courtesy of the artist.

Silke Raetze 'Elegant Surrender' is on at Michael Reid Gallery in Sydney (3rd August – 2nd September 2011)

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