

Conroy/Sanderson: Two Heads Are Better than One¹

The work of Neil Conroy and Lesley Sanderson explores essential questions of identity. In their art, which is executed in mixed media—drawing, painting, photography, video, and more—they continuously contemplate the nature of the self and the other. The varied contrasts that their work presents may be viewed as a philosophical contemplation of the eternal dualism central to Daoist understanding, that is the dynamic interface of yin-yang: east and west, true and false, perceived and real, presence and absence, female and male, young and old, body and soul, individual and society. More specifically, Conroy/Sanderson consider cultural, racial, and gender identities, including the arenas of colonialism and contemporary society in Britain, and in modern China, in ways that challenge viewers to consider their personal biases and perceptions. Their imagery, rich in such yin-yang polarities, raises questions that beg in-depth consideration: both aspects are presented, and there is no real resolution, only a dynamic balance of opposing circumstances. So the works present a conundrum, a Zen koan. Though contemplation of the themes is encouraged, a playful attitude prevails which at times alludes to the Surrealist masters of the last century. Well executed, exact, and refined, the pieces are spare, but at the same time somehow lush in their detail.

In one of their early collaborations, *Fabrication and Reality*, of 1998, such contrasts are apparent in the title, materials, and combination of human and architectural forms.² The artists present a detailed drawing in a Plexiglas frame of a section of Conroy's inner wrist enlarged beyond recognition—like the paired Buddhist mandalas that represent the dual aspects of the cosmos, the phenomenal and the spiritual—along with a backlit carbon copy of the tallest building in Malaysia. As Helen McDonald has argued, the works impart ambiguities and contrasts:

These ambiguities set up a dialogue between one another across the panels, so that the body assumes the building's monumentality and the glowing towers become erotically charged. Links to the female body and to Asian cultural identity can still be traced in this work, but the emphasis has shifted to the processes of reinvention, including those entailed in artistic collaboration, and to the new spaces opened up by the realities of cultural hybridity in the contemporary world. As such, *Fabrication and Reality* is a subtle feminized critique of Eurocentrism. Because of its involvement with the ambiguity,



Conroy/Sanderson, *Absentee*, 2005, video installation. Photo: Neil Conroy. Courtesy of the artists.



Conroy/Sanderson, *Fabrication and Reality*, 1998, graphite on paper, carbon paper, medium-density fibreboard, viewing device, interior lighting. 155 x 150 x 41 cm. Photo: Neil Conroy. Courtesy of the artists.

however, it is also one step removed from the female nude, identity politics, and the question of subjectivity. This detachment is expressed metaphorically, in the following way: at the back of the box, behind the drawing of the body, there is a tiny viewing lens. The spectator uses this lens with the expectation of viewing a structured “interior,” only to encounter an intense blue light. The light dissolves distinctions between inside and outside, promising new formations that will entice new manifestations of desire.³

Such polarities are also present in other works that specifically relate to China. *Absentee*, a video installation of 2005 exhibited in London at the Pitzhanger Manor House and Gallery in Ealing (PM Gallery),⁴ contrasts home and the world, where interior and exterior, foreign and national are pointedly referenced. In the words of the artists:

We projected a slowly dissolving image of a migrant worker sleeping on the street in Beijing onto a Victorian four-poster bed. The dialogue within the work was between the association of the period of empire that the house and bed signifies and economic exploitation of others. This we see as being re-staged throughout the world, in this case, the contemporary situation of displacement through economic migration that one sees all around cities like Beijing, where we were for a month in 2004.

Conroy/Sanderson,
Meantime, 2005, video
projection, 2 mins. Photo:
Sasha Su-Ling Welland.
Courtesy of the artists.

This work is very quiet, atmospheric, and there is a sense of reverence within the piece, largely because of the bedroom it was sited in. The room's main focus is the bed, the wallpaper, a dressing table with mirror, and of course our video that was projected onto softly pleated material at the head of the bed. The image slowly appears out of white light, comes into focus and full colour, holds for a few seconds, then slowly dissolves back into white.⁵

This piece tracks one of the sad disparities that govern our world; as if our own political injustices were not enough, we are also witness to the inequities of the global world. It is an ironic vision, a homeless Chinese improbably enjoying the creature comfort of a British bed. There are multifarious associations: the outside world insistently intruding on the boudoir, the sad reminder of how the insular riches of a capitalist society are dependent on exploiting migrant labour, the many contrasts between home and abroad, and colonialist and capitalist policy. In another piece, *Meantime* (2005), a two-minute video, the roles are reversed. Here the two artists, dressed in pajamas, incongruously stand among a throng





Conroy/Sanderson, *Have Always Touched the Ground Before*, 2005, photograph, 112 x 112 cm. Photo: Neil Conroy. Courtesy of the artists.



of Chinese on a crowded shopping street in Shanghai. As the artists described the work:

We appear in a busy shopping street in Shanghai dressed in pajamas, clothing which infers a private encounter in the West, but which in China takes on a different cultural resonance, one that has to do with inhabiting public space in a way unfamiliar in the West. Our clothing and disappearance into the crowd suggests vulnerability, a state of unease, and of being at odds with ourselves or our environment. We are caught between the intimacy of a shared private space and the visibility of public spaces. *Meantime* explores the private and the public and the influence of place and environment within our subjectivities. It is between the private and the public that our sense of ourselves is formulated.⁶

In a surrealist, dreamlike sequence, the figures are transposed to another time and place. So many of the participants in the video seem unconcerned about the events that are being filmed in their midst. The artists stand facing forward, their rigid posture making their lack of interaction in a foreign environment painfully evident and their vulnerability all the more obvious. Although they share the same bizarre circumstances, their personal differences are highlighted: she is Chinese, he a white male; she is in pink, he in blue. This fantastic interposition recalls nightmares in which the dreamer is projected into a situation inappropriately clothed, or unclothed, and thereby rendered unable to fit in, incapable of functioning. Dreaming, suggested by the bedclothes, touches the issues of being awake and being asleep, of dream and reality, and of consciousness and unconsciousness.

The idea of being dressed in pajamas and interposed into an incongruous setting is employed in other pieces. In one permutation, *Have Always Touched The Ground Before*, a site-specific photograph from 2005, the couple appears in the PM Gallery in London, posed symmetrically in the foreground. In the middle ground is a narrow display wall in front of which is a white marble sculpture of a female turned in dramatic torsion; her theatrical movement highlights the stillness of the couple. In the background, undraped windows establish the twilight of the outside world. Standing stiffly and again facing forward, the subjects each convey the same estrangement and lack of interaction with their surroundings as they did in *Meantime*. They almost appear to be floating, but in this case the couple also represents an artwork. Placed in the gallery, the work of art has a life independent of its creator. Extracting the work from their private realm and interjecting it into the public arena of the art world results in bifurcation of the artists into two parallel existences. But both

the work and the artists are inextricably interrelated and scrutiny, evaluation, and/or appreciation of one is reflective of the other.

The installation *Unfamiliar Narratives* (2004) substitutes meticulously and beautifully rendered drawings of the figures in their pajamas for the photograph.⁷ Filling two narrow, pillar-like compositions, each showing a sliver of the standing figure, the drawings are imposed on a large plywood construction. The wood is simply articulated as a room whose distinguishing features—walls, floor, ceiling and windows—are drawn

Conroy/Sanderson,
Unfamiliar Narratives,
2004, routed
plywood, graphite on
paper, slide projection,
3 x 2.5 x 2.5 metres.
Photo: Neil Conroy.
Courtesy of the artists.



in perspective. At the bottom of the piece, in between the drawings, is a slide projection of the video *Meantime*. Incongruities in the work abound, and examining them reveals layers of pictorial and thematic illusionism. The rigidity of the mechanical architectural interior enhances the softness and irregularity of the drawings. Though the one point-perspective is exact, it is bereft of chiaroscuro and detail and thus remains a schematic rather than a convincing three-dimensional space. Moreover, the figures are too large for the setting they are placed in. The contrast of the nuanced pencil drawings against the tan textured plywood is striking, and the shared medium of the hand-drawn figures





Left: Conroy/Sanderson, *Here We Are*, 2003, three lightboxes, 91 x 152 cm each. Photo: Neil Conroy, Don Jackson. Courtesy of the artists.

suggests a continuity of space: it is as if, revealed through narrow slits in the wall, there exists another dimension. These hand-drawn icons of the artists are then seen in contrast to the “real” video images from their Shanghai experience. Thus there are layers of space and time both physical and illusory. Apparently passive, the figures have great presence, directly staring out at the viewer, despite their bedtime attire. As the artists explain:

Unfamiliar Narratives uses generic drawing styles, such as two large observational drawings and a large diagram computer-routed into plywood, which are placed alongside video projection. This work continues our exploration of the tenuous and fragile line between the private and public and the vulnerability of subjectivity. The reference of space/architecture that is both ambiguous and particular, interior and exterior, quiet and bustling, imaginative and real refer to how spatial relationships impact on subjects. Again, we the subjects are dressed in pajamas to suggest alternative readings within different cultural contexts.⁸

Several other types of self-portraits engage the pair and subject their images to various forms of manipulation that obscure their identity and broaden the content of the images. Once again, these interpretations can be seen as antithetical couplets. Using the format of close-up frontal head and upper body view, *Here We Are* (2003) presents two separate headshots of the artists. In one, Sanderson is expertly wrapped in bandages, and behind her is a backdrop of beautiful blue sky with high-hanging cumulus clouds. The second image shows the cloudy sky, and the third image has the couple posed, completely bandaged together, in front of tropical plants.

The horizontal arrangement and the imagery suggest contrasting states of existence—singular and plural, alone and connected, wounded and whole, earthbound and paradisiacal. The arrangement suggests

Left: Conroy/Sanderson, *Here We Are*, 2003, three lightboxes, 91 x 152 cm each. Photo: Neil Conroy, Don Jackson. Courtesy of the artists.

Top right: Conroy/Sanderson, *At Arm's Length*, 2005, lightbox, 89 x 195 cm. Photo: Neil Conroy. Courtesy of the artists.

Bottom right: Conroy/Sanderson, *Victor and Victoria*, 2004, lightbox, 91 x 152 cm. Photo: Bev Stout. Courtesy of the artists.



a progression through different states of being. Indeed the masked features of the images suggests an interior life unknowable to the viewer. Ironically this work visually alludes to René Magritte's painting *The Lovers* (1928) and other of his works set against a beautiful cloudy blue sky. In this way *Here We Are* also calls forth another set of disparities—questions of social conformity or ostracization, anonymity or recognition, the mundane or spiritual.

Focusing on the question of national and personal identity and the problems of immigration, *Victor and Victoria*, of 2005, is also a dual portrait, but the photograph is taken on a British residential street. Although the format of an ID photo with a head and upper body shot in flat light is adopted, Band-Aids cover the eyes and mouth and bear comical outline drawings of these features. Disfigured in this way, the figures lack expression and the ability to see or to speak.⁹ They are constricted to behave within the confines of their imposed masks, their assigned profile. As the artists maintain, “the work deals with complex relationships of power between subject and viewer, suggesting the power implicit in the act of viewing. The body becomes a site onto which

conflicting intimate or detached perceptions can be projected.”

The situation is similar in *At Arm's Length* (2004) in which the figures are again posed in the same setting, but here they inhabit a large red hood with holes cut out for their eyes.¹⁰ Their outstretched arms extend in a type of greeting. Denied personal identity, detached and alienated from their setting, the subjects are invisible, the artists explained:

At Arm's Length was made for an exhibition, Strangers to Ourselves, in 2004, which was organized in response to the social, political, and economic issues surrounding migration. The exhibition took place over twenty-three venues in South East England, and then London. Our piece was about notions of welcome and rejection of people, and ideas of power over others, as symbolised by the hood, which we hoped made the subjects threatening, whilst also being a ludicrous cowling. The hood in this piece is different to that in *Not There At All*, shifting the dialogue to a suggested vulnerability because of the inability to see out.¹¹

Conroy/Sanderson employ full-body portraits in *Not There At All* (2005) and the theme is similarly expanded to the larger question of cultural identity. The piece takes place in the Music Room of the PM Gallery. Shown in profile, Conroy sits at the piano, apparently playing. Nearby stands Sanderson in full frontal posture. They are dressed in formal attire, but for the continuous coil of light blue cloth that winds round and totally obscures their heads. In performance mode, Sanderson does not look at her accompanist. She stands on her right foot, her left foot relaxed behind; her right hand rests on the piano, while the other rests at her side. The interior is not lit, but the light from oversized windows gently illuminates the room. Leafy trees are visible outside the window. The artists described their work:

Not There At All is a site-specific photograph made in reference to the music room of a heritage Victorian house in England.



Conroy/Sanderson, *Not There At All*, 2005, photograph, 112 x 112 cm. Photo: Neil Conroy. Courtesy of the artists.





Conroy/Sanderson, *The Great Disaster*, 2006, photographs, 81 x 81 cm each. Photo: Neil Conroy. Courtesy of the artists.

It explores the convention of the private music recital, so much a part of European history and heritage. An absurd hood that covers the subjects' head and links them disrupts this image. The photograph aims to unsettle a scene that both elevates and preserves privilege, the respectable, and the historical by an interjection that undermines these values. The work attempts to signal situations within the contemporary world where people are disempowered.¹²

Perhaps the climax of these works is achieved in *The Great Disaster* (2006). Once again the ID photo format, this time the profile view, is employed. The couple is shown individually in separate photos; they face each other wearing molded plastic full-head masks.¹³ Dressed in formal attire, they are positioned stiffly against a neutral background. The artists explained:

The Great Disaster is a double self-portrait made for an exhibition in Salzburg, a UNESCO city. It responds to the city's civic emphasis on the preservation of historical legacies. Every autumn the statues and national monuments are covered with plastic covers to protect them from the heavy winter snows, which we mimic in the rigid plastic masks. At play is a duality between protection and confinement, concealment and transparency, and vulnerability and status, themes that concern us in our migrant, shifting contemporary world.¹⁴



In using a number of inventive formats for their self-portraits, Conroy and Sanderson express many of the complex issues of contemporary life. They have taken their personal diversity and multi-ethnic identity and projected it on the world in which they live, viewing through their work the multifarious circumstances of cultural, sexual, and ethnic identity, the roles of insider and outcast, the contrast between dream and reality, and the distance between past and the present.¹⁴

Notes

¹ Lyrics from "My Analyst Told Me," by Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross; see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StDLnFrbi78&feature=related>.

² *Fabrication and Reality* is made of graphite on paper carbon paper, composite board, wood viewing device in the rear of the piece, and light (measuring 154.9 x 73.6 x 40.6 cm).

³ Helen McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities* (London: Routledge, 2001), 211.

⁴ Pitzhanger Manor House and Gallery, a historic heritage house in Ealing, West London, was the residence of the famous London architect John Soane, who bought the building in 1800, and subsequently redesigned it. Attached to the house is West London's largest contemporary art gallery; see http://www.ealing.gov.uk/services/leisure/museums_and_galleries/pm_gallery_and_house/history/.

⁵ Personal communication, July 2008.

⁶ Personal communication, July 2008.

⁷ *Unfamiliar Narratives* was a commission for the Biggest Draw exhibition at the Millennium Gallery, Sheffield, in 2004. Made of routed plywood, drawings, and slide projections, it measures 3 x 2.5 x 2.5 m.

⁸ Personal communication, July 2008.

⁹ *Victor and Victoria* (152.4 x 88.9 cm) was exhibited in 2004 at the Cruel/Loving Bodies exhibition at the Duolun Museum of Modern Art in Shanghai (see <http://home.earthlink.net/~swelland/clbphotogallery/id1.html>) and at 798 Space, Dashanzi Art District, Beijing 2005, among other venues.

¹⁰ *At Arm's Length*, light box (195.6 x 88.9 cm), was exhibited in Here We Are, Pitzhanger Manor House and Gallery, London, in 2005, and Stranger to Ourselves, in an exhibition that took place over twenty-three venues in South East England, and then London among other venues in 2004.

¹¹ Personal communication, July 2008.

¹² Personal communication, July 2008.

¹³ *The Great Disaster*, (two photos, 81 x 81 cm), was exhibited at the 5020 Gallery, Salzburg, Austria, in 2006.

¹⁴ Personal communication, July 2008.