

ROOM NOTES

"If Botticelli were alive today he'd be working for Vogue"

Peter Ustinov

Denis Montalbetti and Gay Campbell have been working as an artistic partnership for over a quarter of a century. In that time they have developed a unique approach to image-making that has garnered them an international reputation for excellence. Award-winning masters of the studio and of postproduction, they harness the full potential of digital technology to create images with a nonetheless timeless quality. With a practice that spans commercial editorial and fine art, they remind us that many of the artists of the past created their greatest works to commission and for a purpose.

They are truly visual artists. While many contemporary practitioners begin a work with a concept and build an image that illustrates it, Montalbetti & Campbell begin with purely visual elements, fragments of a mental image. These visual fragments arrive from the ether unannounced – in a contemporary take on the classical notion of the muse, they describe these moments of inspiration as being delivered by the 'Cosmic FedEx'.

The images are developed through the symbiotic disciplines of the studio (costume, hair, make-up, setting, lighting) and post-production, where new layers of imagery are fused to the original photograph and the real and the imagined synthesis a new possibility. Ideas emerge from the purely visual, evolve through the act of making

and find meaning in their dialogue with the viewer.

"It is always a privilege to honour someone's presence on the other side of the lens, whether they have achieved a level of public account in their lives or not. It's never about their fame, it's about the person."

Montalbetti and Campbell

In the five rooms of this exhibition we explore some of the most creative and timeless of Montalbetti and Campbell's works, staged within a series of immersive environments styled by Cassandra Scott-Finn with ambient background music selected by the artists.

BIOGRAPHIES

Denis Montalbetti and **Gay Campbell** were born in Canada and live and work in Sydney. They have received numerous awards including a Gold World Award at the New York Festivals Advertising Awards and Canon AIPP Professional Photographer of the Year. Their work is represented in public, private and print collections nationally and internationally including the National Gallery of Australia; National Portrait Gallery of Australia; Australian Museum of Sport; Australian Institute of Professional Photography; Australia Commercial and Media Photographers.

Cassandra Scott-Finn is a Sydney-based stylist working in the creative advertising, fashion, film and music industries.

australian centre for photography

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Montalbetti & Campbell fine art representation: Sandra Byron Gallery, Sydney; commercial representation: IS Production, Sydney and Michael Ginsburg Associates, New York

Cassandra Scott-Finn works freelance:
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ACP PARTNERS



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27 NOVEMBER 2009 - 23 JANUARY 2010
(closed from 25 December reopens 9 January)
GALLERY 1 + 2

MONTALBETTI & CAMPBELL

The Sensualists

Exhibition styled by Cassandra Scott-Finn

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Come to the edge
We can't. We're afraid
Come to the edge
We can't. We will fall!
Come to the edge
And they came
And he pushed them
And they flew

Guillaume Apollinaire

Room One

We begin the journey with works familiar from the assignments undertaken for two popular television series: *Make Me a Supermodel* (Channel 7, 2008) and *Australia's Next Top Model* (Fox 8, 2009). Here the novice models are transformed into the creatures of folk mythology – mermaids, mermen and flower fairies. By involving the viewer in the process of making, these television programs revealed just how much hard work and commitment goes into images like these – from all concerned: artists, models, make-up, styling. The sensuous elegance of the final image transcends the hard graft involved in birthing it.

You can view a segment from *Make Me a Supermodel* in the lounge area. This shows the shooting of the Mermaid image seen here.

Room Two

Here in the main chamber we encounter some of Montalbetti & Campbell's most painterly images. The languid sensuality of *The Dream* contrasts with the imperial formality of *Katania* or the celestial elegance of *Poh Ling Yeow*.

As Robert Cook notes in his catalogue essay for this exhibition, Montalbetti & Campbell's style does not attempt to emulate a specific period in art history. "It is the shifting amalgam of references made coherent by their overall vision ... You stare at the work and your mind is going in a million different places."

These are images that remain open for those that come to gaze upon them. They seduce but do not instruct. Once drawn into their imaginary realm the viewer is free to spin their own story; to follow their own path.

Room Three

In this new work made especially for the exhibition we encounter the dark imaginings of Gothic romanticism, with its obsessive riffs on the fantastical possibilities of scientific discovery. Based upon anatomical drawings showing the complex networks of blood vessels and nerves, muscles and sinews that lie below the skin, these are sexy-macabre characters that would be at home in Mary Shelley's novels, Grimm's fairytales or *Buffy* and *Twilight*.

In a world in which skin-deep beauty – taut, glowing and apparently eternal – is the order of the day, these images remind us of our physical interiors and our mutability. The unsettling power of these works lies in the way they suggest the unseen and the unacknowledged that lies beneath.

Room Four

Turning left, we enter the bitter-sweet twilight world of love lost and love beyond reach. There is a compelling sense of poetic tragedy; of jilted brides, folly paid for and damsels lost in the dark forest. And in the shadows stands a mesmerizingly handsome young man: Romeo? Oberon? Lucifer? The threads of this melancholy fable are yours to weave.

Room Five

In the final room we find Montalbetti + Campbell's darkly sensual style refracted through the visual vernacular of 20th century popular culture. From the *Moulin Rouge* and Hollywood glamour to biker art and the tattooist's parlour these personal and commissioned works toy with the iconography of sex and danger.

Included here are fantasy portraits of American novelist Nick Tosches, the illusionist and endurance artist David Blaine, the Australian professional mountain biker Niki Gudex and twin-sister recording artists The Veronicas.

It is the artists' openness to possibility that brings such richness to their images, be it the intuitions of the Cosmic FedEx, the unexpected gesture of a model or the outcome of a random process. In the portrait of novelist Rick Moody, made to accompany his novel *The Black Veil*, the apparition in the billowing fabric was a real event. It was not created in post production but captured in the instant of the camera shutter.

"It's like a dance, keep step with whoever is on the other side of the lens whether they're leading or following, we're engaged in the process."

Montalbetti and Campbell