



Learning Resource

Petrina Hicks

SNAKES and MIRRORS

This resource is intended to support teachers and students before, during and after a visit to the exhibition, in conjunction with information provided within the exhibition and on the website.

It contains an introduction to the exhibition, a focus on selected works and critical thinking prompts.

Use this resource to assist in developing class content, discussions, and activities regarding the exhibition and its themes.

Petrina HICKS
The Self Awareness of African Grey Parrots 2024 (diptych)
pigment inkjet print



Petrina Hicks | SNAKES and MIRRORS

Petrina Hicks (born Australia 1972) is a Sydney-based artist whose large-scale photographs explore female identity, with a focus on the interior world or psyche. Drawing inspiration from mythology, fables and art history, she creates images with a contemporary and hyperreal aesthetic that probe female experience in current culture. Animals and females often appear together in Hicks's photographs. She explains, 'I am drawn to tracing the boundaries of each creature. I see the female alignment with nature and animal cycles as something powerful.'

The idea for the *Snakes and Mirrors* series derives from a poem titled *The Eight Elegy* by Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926). This poem portrays the mystical relationship between humans and animals and contemplates how each experiences time and phenomena differently. Rilke claims that animals are less aware of the past and future and have no presentiment of their own death, thus they live more purely in the moment, free of constraints. In contrast, humans perceive time as a linear continuum with death as the end point; this heightened self-awareness makes us 'eternal spectators' rather than full participants in the natural world.

Snakes and Mirrors considers the self-awareness and sentience of animals and our desire to understand them from a human perspective. Snakes, monkeys, fish and birds engage with female models, provoking curiosity in the viewer. Symbolic elements, such as mirrors and glasses, reinforce the narrative or feeling being explored.



Petrina HICKS
Memento mori I and II 2024
pigment inkjet

Snakes and Mirrors is Hicks's first exhibition shot with a digital camera (a Fujifilm GFX100S with a Fujifilm 110mm lens). Previously, her practice involved shooting images on film using medium and large format Hasselblad and Linhof Technika 4x5 cameras, respectively. Hicks carefully composes her images in the studio: 'I'm often observing minute changes in gesture or pose, then homing in on something very subtle, so I find the controlled lighting environment assists with this.' Despite the surreal nature of the imagery, that might suggest the use of Photoshop, editing software is used only to adjust and refine, rather than to construct images.

By setting her images against neutral backgrounds, Hicks removes the subject from reality and places it into an illusionary space 'that cannot be connected to any particular time in history, like a void.' Subjects are lit in a way that emphasises their form, inviting the viewer to circulate the work, as you would a sculpture.

Ambiguity and mystery are common features of Hicks's works: 'I like the idea of playing with images and using the tools of commercial photography [...] to create tension between this beautiful surface of the image and the subtext.' Her images draw the viewer in with their sense of stillness, harmony and quiet perfection, offset by undercurrents of the uncanny or surreal.

Memento mori is a series of three images showing a female hand in upright position, supporting a delicate grey snake that coils around the wrist and fingers. A speckled egg balances improbably on the end of a finger or two and in *Memento mori II*, two ladybirds climb the edge of the hand. Fine details such as the wrinkles, lines and veins of the hand, the precisely layered scales of the snake and the patterning of the eggs, make the image vividly real. The natural pose of the fingers and soft colour palette suggest a playful, almost tender interaction between the model and snake, which contrasts the title of the series. '*Memento mori*' is a Latin phrase meaning 'remember you must die.' *Memento mori* in art remind the viewer of their mortality and the shortness and fragility of life.

Snakes are a potent symbol in history and mythology. Cleopatra, the last queen of the Ptolemaic Dynasty, used snake venom to end her own life; Eurydice, a nymph in Greek mythology, was fatally bitten by a viper but was rescued from the Underworld by her lover Orpheus. The stories of Cleopatra and Eurydice are depicted in many artworks. The snake is also associated with Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine and healing. Asclepius is signified by a staff entwined with a serpent, the ancient Greek symbol of wisdom, healing and resurrection. The presence of the snake in *Memento mori* signals danger and death; this is countered by the egg, which signifies new life.

Consider:

What do these three images convey about humans' relationship with snakes?

What significance might the ladybirds hold in *Memento mori II*?

What narrative might the images convey? How might the narrative change if the images were in different order?

How does knowledge of mythology impact your reading of these works?



Petrina HICKS

**The Self Awareness of African Grey
Parrots 2024** (diptych)
pigment inkjet print

In *The Self Awareness of African Grey Parrots*, a parrot contemplates its reflection in the sunglasses of a beautiful young woman. In the second image the glasses are removed, and the parrot looks away from the woman's gaze. The green headscarf and the grey parrot allude to the exotic, while the sunglasses and crisp imagery signal contemporaneity. Known as intelligent, mimicking birds attuned to their owners' emotions, African Grey parrots have featured in art for centuries, most prominently in seventeenth century Dutch scenes of ordinary life. In this era owning a rare parrot was a marker of status, conveying worldliness and wealth.

Hicks states that in her works 'animals become metaphors to help understand identity and the nature of being human.' Parrots have been historically used in the arts to symbolise attributes such as loyalty, beauty and intelligence, and notions of virginal purity. Hence, the African Grey parrot in these images might reflect the young woman's virtues, while her glasses literally reflect the image of the bird. Visual balance is created through pastel colours and soft textural elements, in the parrot's plumage and the female's skin, glasses and headscarf.

Mnemosyne III is a surreal, dreamlike image of a flawless female face immersed in clear water, surrounded by a group of small shimmering fish. The title of the work references Mnemosyne—the Greek goddess of memory and the inventor of words and language—who presided over a pool in the Underworld. According to Greek mythology, if dead souls drank from Mnemosyne’s pool, they would remember everything from their past lives, better preparing them for the afterlife.

Although the female’s eyes are not visible in *Mnemosyne III*, small bubbles appear as teardrops rolling down her face, hinting at the recollection of sad memories.



Petrina HICKS
Mnemosyne III 2024
pigment inkjet print

Words and memory are closely interrelated, facilitating recognition, meaning, reason and knowledge building, faculties which distinguish humans from animals.

Consider:

What might the fish signify in this photograph?

Which other elements might be symbolic?

How does learning the story of Mnemosyne change your view of the image?



Petrina HICKS
**Snakes and Mirrors (with
Olwen Fouéré)** 2024
pigment inkjet print

Snakes and Mirrors (with Olwen Fouéré) is a portrait of Irish actress and writer Olwen Fouéré, who is renowned for her original and often very physical performances. Photographed from the chest up like a sculptural bust, the portrait is a powerful statement of character. Fouéré gazes steadily into the camera, unperturbed by the pale snake that winds around her neck and over the mirror in her right hand. She embodies the archetypal wise woman projecting timeless beauty, knowledge and power, confidence, inner strength and agency. By turning the mirror to the viewer, the subject rejects personal vanity and asks the viewer to reflect on themselves. The snake's ability to shed its skin has made it a symbol of transformation and renewal. From a feminist viewpoint, it signifies liberation and breaking free from restrictive gender roles.

Consider:

What other associations does *Snakes and Mirrors (with Olwen Fouéré)* hold for you?
How would a different colour palette impact the meaning of image?

Snakes and Mirrors is a soulful contemplation of the inner worlds of animals and females. While writer Rilke stresses our separation from the animal realm, Hicks leaves the door open for meaningful interactions that may enlighten both human and animal modes of being.

Suggested activities and critical thinking prompts

Describe your emotional or even physical response to one of Petrina Hicks's images.

How do Hicks's images differ from traditional photographic portraiture?

Consider how colour, lighting and composition create mood in one or more of the exhibited artworks.

Snakes and mirrors can hold both positive and negative symbolism. Research the meaning attached to both snakes and mirrors in different cultures (e.g. Chinese and Egyptian), religions (e.g. Christian and Buddhist) and times.

Research the stories of Cleopatra and Eurydice and find artworks showing aspects of the events described. How are the characters depicted?

Research and compare ancient and modern artworks that portray the *ouroboros*. What does this serpent symbolise?

Find an image of the painting *Woman Feeding a Parrot, with a Page* (1666) by Dutch painter Caspar Netscher, which also features an interaction between a young woman and an African Grey parrot. Compare this painting with Hicks's artwork *The Self Awareness of African Grey Parrots*. What are the similarities and differences?

Hicks has commented that she uses the tools of commercial or advertising photography to create her images. Which tools might she be referring to?

Petrina Hicks is interested in animal consciousness. What interesting facts or ideas can you discover about how animals perceive the world?

Which elements of the works in *Snakes and Mirrors* might be 'timeless'? Which elements are very much of our time?

References

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This learning resource was researched and written by Nora Straznicky with the support of the MAPH team as part of an internship at MAPH. Design by Alice Beyer.