

From the collection



Yvonne Todd (b.1973), Valley Candle, 2008, lightjet print, 1590 x 1200mm

With a background as a commercial photographer and shop assistant in a wig salon, Yvonne Todd is well versed in artifice and masquerade.

She completed her BFA at Elam School of Fine Arts in 2001, the year before she won New Zealand's art world's highest art accolade, the Walters Prize, awarded to her by Venice Biennale curator Harald Szeeman. Her *Sea of Tranquility* series from that year posed beauty consultants collected up from Auckland department stores against black backgrounds like so many Stepford Wives. She has continued to foreground the performance of femininity ever since, although her practice is centred more generally on the business of image-making itself.

Like all her photographs, *Valley Candle* from the 2008 series *Dawn of Gland* was made using a large-format camera and tripod in her studio, using transparency film. Photoshopping blends two views of the same woman in the same image to make it appear as if she is regarding her own reflection critically in a mirror. The subject's unease is ironic given that the Bob Mackie gown she wears was formerly owned by a woman known for her

bright-eyed, uncomplicated personality and chirpy charm: *South Pacific* star Mitzi Gaynor.

This pink chiffon and brocade costume is one of many which Todd sources from American internet auctions which inspire the creation of a cast of larger-than-life characters. Combined with synthetic wigs and elaborate make-up, these fabulous frocks serve to create personae which could be described as showgirls from outer space. Having gone 12 rounds with the mascara wand, they seem enervated; in full battledress, but not looking forward to the war.

Todd's customary black background produces a sense of time suspended, a casino-like limbo where hours might slip past unnoticed. In *Valley Candle* we apprehend a woman who is incandescent but unconfident, an incarnation of the candle in the wind of Elton John's tribute song to the tragedy and celebrity encompassed by the life and death of both Marilyn Monroe and Princess Diana. Determinedly blonde with a Californian tan, her natural habitat might be the *Valley of the Dolls* of Jacqueline Susann's pulp fiction, or a cabaret.

Linda Tyler